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6
The Apothecary Diaries

Table of Contents

Cover

Prologue
Chapter 1: The Western Capital—Day Four
Chapter 2: The Floating Bride (Part One)
Chapter 3: The Floating Bride (Part Two)
Chapter 4: Homeward Bound
Chapter 5: Wrapping Up in the Western Capital
Chapter 6: The La Clan (Part One)
Chapter 7: The La Clan (Part Two)
Chapter 8: The Conclusion of Lishu's Journey
Chapter 9: Homecoming
Chapter 10: The Bad Dumplings
Chapter 11: The Dancing Water Sprite
Chapter 12: The Trials of Consort Lishu
Chapter 13: Scandal (Part One)
Chapter 14: Scandal (Part Two)
Chapter 15: Scandal (Part Three)
Chapter 16: Basen and Lishu
Epilogue

Color Illustrations
Bonus Translator's Notes

About J-Novel Club
Copyright

Character Profiles

Maomao
An apothecary in the pleasure district. Downright obsessed with medicines and poisons. Nineteen years old. Daughter of a courtesan and the military strategist Lakan.

Jinshi
Played the part of a eunuch in the rear palace, but his true identity is the Emperor's younger brother. Inhumanly beautiful. Real name: Ka Zuigetsu. Twenty years old.

Basen
Gaoshun's son; Jinshi's attendant. Can be almost helplessly earnest, but in battle there's no one you'd rather have at your side.

Lakan
Maomao's father. The freak strategist; the monocled freak; the old bastard. (All nicknames Maomao uses for him.)

Lahan
Maomao's cousin and Lakan's adopted son. Big on numbers.

Luomen
Maomao's adoptive father; Lakan's uncle. An extremely accomplished physician, but seems to have more than his share of bad luck and unhappiness.

Consort Lishu
One of the Emperor's four most favored consorts. Very young and still timid. Sixteen years old.

Ah-Duo
Formerly one of the Emperor's four favored consorts. A handsome woman who dresses in men's clothing.

Empress Gyokuyou
The Emperor's legal wife. Hails from the west. Daughter of Gyokuen. An exotic beauty with red hair and green eyes.

The Madam
The old lady who runs the Verdigris House, the brothel where Maomao operates. A real miser.

The Three Princesses
Pairin, Meimei, and Joka. The three most popular courtesans at the Verdigris House.

Chou-u
A child survivor of the Shi clan. He's partially paralyzed and has lost his memories. A talented artist.

Ukyou
Chief manservant of the Verdigris House. He's of medium build and doesn't immediately stand out, but his considerate nature makes him popular among the courtesans.

Sazen
A former farmer who fled to the capital after the Shi rebellion. Currently in training as an apothecary.

Zulin
An apprentice at the Verdigris House. Unable to talk. Chou-u's henchman.

Gyokuen
Empress Gyokuyou's father. An official who ranks high enough to hold the western capital, but still hasn't received a family name from the Emperor.

Uryuu
Consort Lishu's father. He raised Lishu, but never loved her.

Prologue

Jinshi stared at the crackling brazier. It was going to be another cold night. Basen put some more coals on the fire.

It got bitterly cold in the western capital after the sun went down. The whiplash change from the heat of the day might be enough to make some people take ill. Not Jinshi—he wasn't used to nights in this sandy region, exactly, but at the moment he preferred the chill.

Jinshi was resting on a couch, a melancholy expression on his face. On the table in front of him, a cup of citrus-and-honey cut with hot water sat untouched. He was thirsty, but he couldn't bring himself to drink it. He didn't want to relinquish the sensation that still lingered on his lips.

He let his fingers brush across his mouth, as if to confirm for himself what had touched them just an hour before. His body was possessed by a combination of heat and gloom that wouldn't seem to go away.

He could still see it when he closed his eyes: her face looking down at him, the stars above the only light. He hadn't been able to see her well, and yet it seemed to him he could remember her so clearly. Her eyes, usually languid, were dim, but her mouth glistened warm and moist. A thread dangled from the moistness, and then fell away. It was over, Jinshi saw with a combination of disappointment and relief.

And then the regret.

His partner was well within her comfort zone. She never blushed, nor looked away in embarrassment. Only stared calmly, coldly down at the man beneath her, then licked her lips, sucking in the thread of saliva. She wasn't savoring the afterglow, but simply eliminating all traces, as if it had never happened. Her small body bestrode Jinshi's, easily twice her size, her hand placed over his heart. She could feel his heartbeat, but he couldn't feel hers.

What did she think, feeling the way it raced and pounded?

It was obvious at a glance. The wind caught her hair, sending

ripples through it. Her eyes narrowed, and she looked at him. Her alluring lips arched. *"My, my. Done already?"* she seemed to ask, although she said nothing. Her smile made clear how much she still had left in her.

It meant he had lost.

Jinshi's shoulders slumped at the memory. He had tried to make some riposte, but the apothecary girl had simply said "Pardon me" and left as if nothing had happened. She claimed she heard her cousin calling; it was like she had nothing more to do here. She would have been more emotional about a dog bite. Or a mosquito bite.

Jinshi heaved a sigh as he returned to reality.

"I knew it, sir. You're not feeling well, are you?" said his attendant, Basen. If Jinshi said he was feeling fine, Basen would only press him about whether something had happened. And if he said he was indeed feeling unwell, Basen would probably take it upon himself to nurse Jinshi back to health and never leave the room.

There were moments when Jinshi wished to be alone—he always wondered why Basen hadn't inherited his father Gaoshun's intuition for that. The young man could be a bit dense.

Jinshi wasn't the only one who felt out of sorts that day, though. Basen seemed different from usual as well. His cheeks were redder than normal—not like he had suddenly gotten excellent circulation, but more like he was excited about something. Maybe it was fighting that lion. A bandage was wrapped around his right hand, the hand that had been holding the iron bar. It was swollen; when the apothecary girl had spotted the ugly appendage, she'd declared, "It's broken" and promptly begun to check him over, but inside she probably had questions about the obtuse young man.

"You look more tired than I do today, Basen. You ought to go get some rest."

"By no means, sir; not after what just happened. Who knows if they might try something else?" he said earnestly. Jinshi really, really wished he would take a hint.

Jinshi picked up the honey-water, but didn't drink it, just let it warm his hands. Even if he'd changed into his sleepwear and gone to bed, Basen probably still wouldn't have left. There was another couch in the room with a cushion that could double as a pillow if need be.

Jinshi couldn't sleep, and it seemed Basen couldn't either. Was it the adrenaline of fighting a large animal—or was it something else entirely? It was more than just the customary furrow in his brow; Basen's lips were twisted into a frown. Some memory seemed to flit into his mind, and each time, he would blink, then shake his head suddenly as if to get rid of it. It was very suspicious.

One of the strange things about humans is how they become calm when someone else is struggling worse than they are. Jinshi let out another deep sigh. He couldn't go on like this. The night's banquet might have been over, but there were still more meetings tomorrow. He resolved to find some equilibrium. He recognized, though, that being alone would not be the best way to get his thoughts together. Instead he said, "Basen."

"Yes, Master Jinshi?" Basen replied, using Jinshi's assumed name. That was easiest for Jinshi. If Basen wasn't going to call him by his true name, as he had when they were children, then this was the next best thing.

"Have you ever succeeded in bringing someone around?"

Frankly, Basen was not a very good choice to talk to about such matters, but Jinshi wasn't looking for a serious response. He could answer his own questions; he just wanted to talk out loud so he didn't sit there with his mind going in circles. Basen didn't need to understand exactly what Jinshi meant; he just needed to offer a *yes* or *no* or a grunt here or there.

"Er, how so, sir? You've spoken to so many people since we got here that I don't know whom you might be referring to..."

It was true: a great many women had spoken to Jinshi since his arrival in the western capital. How many? One wouldn't wish to say.

"You don't have to finish that thought," Jinshi said.

Basen's brow wrinkled. "I'm not in your position, sir, and I don't have much experience in such matters. Though in the future I may find I gain some, whether I want to or not."

He probably never *had* experienced such things, not yet. Even though they had only seen each other a few times a year since Jinshi had entered the rear palace, they were still milk brothers and trusted friends. Jinshi knew that Basen didn't always feel very confident around women—the more womanly, the less he liked to have anything to do with them. The fact that he was able to have a more or less normal conversation with the apothecary girl

suggested he didn't see her in those terms, although Jinshi was conflicted as to whether that was a good thing or a bad one. It wasn't misogyny—rather a sign of how deeply Basen's early experiences had influenced him. A misfortune that had occurred because of his particular characteristics.

Basen responded to Jinshi's question by stroking his chin. "I can only say I suppose it would depend on the person. There are a lot of people I don't feel entirely comfortable around. But the situation has something to do with it too. How confident and competent the other person is can affect the flow, and vice versa. And you have to deal with so *many* people at once, Master Jinshi—isn't it a strain?"

"'So many at once'? I think you're overestimating me." Jinshi hadn't expected quite such a direct answer. He smiled sardonically to hear himself described as if he were crazed with lust. Come to think of it, Basen had been going to the pleasure district in Gaoshun's place a lot lately. Had he managed to gain some experience? Jinshi knew what a cunning saleswoman the madam of that brothel could be. She might well have tried to give Basen the hard sell.

Jinshi looked at Basen, conflicted. The Verdigris House was a high-class brothel with excellent courtesans. And Basen idealized women, even if he wasn't very good at talking to them. The educated—and very firm-handed—ladies at the Verdigris House might be surprisingly congenial for him.

Jinshi swallowed heavily. "Basen... Did something happen? At the Verdigris House?"

"Wh-What's this all of a sudden?!" Basen asked, startled. The man was a bad liar—quite frankly, he was a less than ideal adjutant when it came to politics. But that aspect of his personality was exactly what allowed Jinshi to relax around him. "Nothing happened," Basen insisted. "And anyway, I can rise to the occasion when I need to!"

Rise to the occasion? A somewhat unsettling choice of words—but yes, Basen could indeed do what he had to do, when he had to do it. Jinshi was willing to acknowledge that much. He swallowed again, realizing he would have to rethink how he saw his milk brother once more.

"What brings this on, Master Jinshi? Did something happen with *you*?"

"No. It's simply that there's someone I would very much like to

triumph over," Jinshi said, although he had to struggle to get the words out. He was nowhere near smooth enough to handle "so many" women at once, and he wanted to avoid inflating Basen's opinion of his abilities any further.

He went on: "I'd gotten the idea that I knew how to play this game. This someone can be rather elegant, but in practice I'm supposed to be the superior—and perhaps I trusted too much to that. That illusion was thoroughly shattered tonight, and it's left me feeling quite pathetic."

He might not always have a *great* deal of confidence, but he'd at least had some. He couldn't count how many women had come on to him in his six years at the rear palace, and it had given him the (more than a little conceited) belief that he could make them dance in his palm.

Basen was looking at him with a hint of amazement. "This person must be quite skilled, sir, to make you say that."

"Yes..." At least Basen didn't seem to realize whom Jinshi was talking about. Thankfully. "We fought over something minor," he said. "I started the fight...and I lost it."

Basen looked puzzled for a second, but then he said, "Ah!" as if it all made sense to him. "You lost, sir? Ahh, so that's what you mean... A sparring partner, sir? What a boor they must be!"

He could be perceptive at the most surprising moments. Perhaps it would sound insulting to suggest Jinshi was startled to realize Basen even knew what it really meant to be rivals in love. But that Rikuson—that was his name, right?—he might look like just another pretty face, but he wasn't to be underestimated. He was a direct subordinate of the strategist, Lakan—but *he* wasn't the one Jinshi was worried about.

"So there was someone at that banquet who could make even you admit defeat, Master Jinshi," Basen said quietly, looking profoundly thoughtful.

"Don't flatter me, please. I'm aware that I'm still young. My opponent is like a willow tree, or...or like trying to shove a curtain. No matter how much I push or strike, they simply roll with it."

The question was what his inexperienced self should do. The only thing that would help would be to gain some of that experience, he supposed—but how? He couldn't go about romancing another woman, but neither did it seem wise to head for a brothel simply because there supposedly wouldn't be any

consequences.

It was then that Basen said something quite unexpected. “Can I be of help in some way?”

“I’m sorry?” Jinshi said, nearly dropping his water. He knew for a fact Basen was straight—so how could he say that?

And yet Basen went on: “I must confess I’m not very capable. I’m all too aware that you’re far more skilled than I am, Master Jinshi. But I venture this suggestion in the belief that it *must* be better than simply moping around doing nothing.”

“Basen...”

Yes, he was right. And if Jinshi did it with Basen, well, on some level, it didn’t count, did it? That must be what the young man was thinking. Well, but—no, wait. Something was off here.

“Skill I may lack, but I’m confident in my stamina, how much I can endure,” Basen said.

“St-Stamina? I really don’t think...”

No, this wasn’t a conversation Jinshi could continue. He quailed. Maybe Basen had been taught some twisted game at the Verdigris House, he fretted. Should he report this to Gaoshun?

Basen, though, was looking at Jinshi, completely serious. He seemed excited, but not in the overheated way he had earlier. “Just think of it as practice, sir. Nothing more. I may not be the person you have in mind, but just...pretend.”

Jinshi lapsed into thought—and then jumped into action. He put the water on the table, rose from the couch, and slowly came and stood in front of Basen.

“Shall we move somewhere, sir? It’s a bit cramped here.”

“No, this is space enough.”

It wasn’t as if they needed to use the bed. And he absolutely didn’t want anyone to see them, so he had to finish this while they were still in this room.

Basen was about two *sun* shorter than Jinshi—he wished Basen might shrink another seven.

Jinshi leaned in, and Basen backed away. What was this? He acted so much like the very person Jinshi was imagining!

“Master Jinshi?”

“It’s all right. That’s perfect.”

“I’m, er, empty-handed...”

“So am I.”

Yes... Now that he thought about it, he’d heard tell of

employing all manner of tools and contraptions, but he had certainly never expected Basen to bring up such a thing. They *had* taught him perverse things in the pleasure district, Jinshi was sure of it now. But maybe he shouldn't mention it to Gaoshun.

All right. No more reason for Jinshi to hesitate, then. No reason to be inordinately restrained.

Each time Jinshi got closer, Basen opened up the space again, not with the slight stagger of the apothecary girl, but the agility of a trained soldier.

"Master Jinshi?"

"This person never initiates, but only responds to what is done."

"So, Master Jinshi, I should—?"

Basen looked at Jinshi, deeply concerned; his back was already against the wall. Jinshi had succeeded at that before; it could almost be called his specialty. With Basen all but cornered, Jinshi planted his hand firmly against the wall. *Bam!*

"M-Master Jinshi..."

"No. Be quiet."

Jinshi focused his imagination: he was picturing not his milk brother, but the person he wished to best. He had to strike before the mouth spoke, the mouth that was usually so inarticulate, but grew voluble and clever at the oddest times. He took Basen's chin with his free hand and pressed his thumb to his lips.

"M-M-M..." Basen had gone completely white, and from this distance, Jinshi could see he was covered in sweat. Why did he look so worried? This was his suggestion! Somehow, he almost looked as if he hadn't expected any of this to happen.

Could there be some mistake here? Some crucial, momentous misunderstanding?

Perhaps it was the tension both of them were feeling—neither noticed the sound of voices right outside. And just as Jinshi was about to put the pieces together, the door to the room flew open with a tremendous bang.

"It's been too long since we shared a drink! And I've caught a most fascinating quarry in my net!" announced a sprightly but gender-neutral voice.

"L-Lady Ah-Duo!" cried a guard outside, but the lovely person in men's garb was already pushing past him into the room. The odor of alcohol came with her; she seemed to have been sharing a drink with herself before she'd thought to invite Jinshi. She'd been

like this ever since the rear palace, always trying to get him to drink with her. Maybe she was a little soused, because the way she entered the room was, well, forceful at best.

And the moment she had chosen was an awkward one.

Jinshi was almost on top of Basen, who was pinned against the wall with Jinshi's fingers brushing his lips in what was unmistakably a lover's caress. Basen was sweating and his face was completely bloodless.

The two guards who had come in trying to restrain Ah-Duo covered their eyes with their hands and peeked out between their fingers. As for Ah-Duo, her eyes went wide and her mouth dropped open.

"Ah!" she said. "That's right. You don't *have* to choose a flower. I guess I was mistaken."

With that she backed out of the room and politely shut the door.

Neither Jinshi nor Basen said anything, but after a moment of silence, the darkened You manor was filled with the sounds of two men shouting at each other.

Chapter 1: The Western Capital—Day Four

The sunlight that got past the curtains pried open Maomao's heavy eyelids. The bed (complete with fancy canopy), the bright, clear air, and the elaborate furnishings reminded her once again that she was not in her house at the capital.

Want…more…sleep…

She sat up, rubbing her eyes. Nights were so cold that she slept under several heavy blankets and some sort of pelt, but once the sun rose, it got awfully hot. Already, one of the layers was on the ground, and Maomao's feet were kicked out from under the covers.

She thought she'd heard shouting in the middle of the night; it had woken her up, and she'd slept only lightly after that. Who would do that sort of thing? What obnoxious neighbors.

Breakfast should be arriving soon. Maomao was happy they didn't all have to get together to eat—probably a bit of courtesy toward hungover guests. Deciding to get changed before the serving girl arrived, Maomao slipped out of her sleepwear, putting on an outfit she picked at random from a clothing rack.

Today she was wearing an ordinary skirt and short-sleeved top over a cool-looking drape. The best thing about it was the way it breathed. Touches of embroidery on the collar and hem gave it a western look. The silver hair stick sat on the table.

Hm…

Maomao didn't put it on her head, but used a simple tie to hold back her hair. She did, though, place the hair stick in the folds of her clothes to make sure she wouldn't lose it. She always carried a small package containing medicine, bandages, and the like, so she simply added it to that.

The knock on the door came just as she finished changing. "Come in," she said, and a maid entered with a cart bearing breakfast. The menu was a little sparser than usual, perhaps taking into account the extensive banquet the night before.

Maomao had a couple mouthfuls of the plain congee, and was just thinking some black vinegar might improve the flavor when a very loud knock came on the door. Maomao poured some black vinegar into her congee, took a bite, and then, not hiding her annoyance, said, "Come in."

"I would swear it took you an extra moment to answer," Basen said as he entered. There was a man with him, but it wasn't Jinshi. Unsure how to feel about that, Maomao swallowed her food and pretended she didn't know what Basen was talking about.

"It was your imagination, I'm sure," she said.

"You're having breakfast?" Basen asked. Not that it seemed to motivate him to leave. Something, Maomao figured, must have happened.

She set down her chopsticks and looked at him. "What's going on?" His right hand was wrapped in a bandage, the one Maomao had put there the night before. He had been so full of adrenaline that even the swelling and the fact that the bone was broken hadn't seemed to bother him. There was dense, and then there was *dense*.

Basen took a breath, then produced a cloth package from the folds of his robe. He set it on the table and opened it to reveal another package, this one of oil paper. No sooner had he unwrapped it than Maomao's nose prickled and she started back.

The offensive odor came from a ceramic jar in the packet. "Is that perfume, by any chance?" she asked. She'd smelled it before—it was the stuff that had been spilled all over Consort Lishu at the banquet. "Where did you get this?"

"Funny you should ask," Basen said. His expression was conflicted; he was obviously suppressing a flash of anger. "Lady Ah-Duo brought it to us."

"And where did she get it?"

"She said one of her bodyguards found it. Late last night—a serving woman of Consort Lishu's half-sister had it. She was out walking when for some reason a stray dog attacked her, and the guard happened to help her."

Just happened to, eh?

What were the chances the guard's being there had really been coincidence? Even so far from the capital, why would a serving woman be out and about by herself? The logical inference would be that in fact the guard had been sent to tail her because Ah-Duo was suspicious of her. But there was no reason to specifically say that

out loud.

"The mongrel seemed inordinately excited, and despite the presence of other people, it completely ignored them. It made a beeline for this serving woman."

"You're saying this perfume was the reason for that?" Maomao pressed a cloth over her nose and picked up the jar. Ceramic ware wasn't that unusual. No one made ceramic perfume jars purely for stylistic purposes, so it would be hard to trace the origin of the piece. "That would imply that the perfume Consort Lishu was doused with last night belonged to her half-sister, yes? And this smell evidently has the side effect of agitating wild animals."

"I think that's almost certainly correct," Basen said.

Had the half-sister purchased the perfume purely as a prank? Maomao wouldn't have put it past her. But did she hate Lishu enough to want to get rid of her? And even if she had the motive, Maomao doubted she and the serving woman between them had the skills to rig the bars of the lion's cage.

She considered the possibility that Lishu's father Uryuu had helped them, but that theory left questions too. For one thing, if they had been trying to get rid of Lishu, it was an awfully roundabout way of doing it. There would have been so many simpler solutions. Above all, the risk was simply too great. Nonetheless, there was one thing Maomao wanted to be sure about.

"So you're taking the consort's half-sister to be the culprit?"

Basen paused. "We can't say for certain. But if nothing changes, I think that's where we would find ourselves." An artfully vague way of putting it. That was unusual for Basen. He was normally much more direct. Maomao might have expected him to exclaim, *"Yes! She must be punished!"*

Instead he went on, "The half-sister claims it was just supposed to be a prank. She says someone she met in town a few days ago gave her the perfume. They told her it would attract nasty insects, and wouldn't that be funny? The half-sister swears she didn't expect a lion to be involved..."

So she admitted her malice toward Lishu. She just hadn't planned on the lion. If that was all true, how did it change things?

"If she was also involved in booby-trapping the lion's cage, that would go beyond a prank," Maomao said. There had been many dignitaries at the banquet besides Lishu, and she would have been putting them in danger as well. If she really had only been going

after the consort, she might still get away with it. Lishu was a relative, for one thing, and importantly, she would have some discretion in how hard to push for punishment. The half-sister might not get off scot-free, but maybe with just a slap on the wrist.

"You're right. And not only the half-sister, but Sir Uryuu as well as Consort Lishu herself might feel the heat from it," Basen said.

"You think a little heat is all they're going to feel?" Maomao asked. She expected them to be scorched. Many powerful people from another country had been at that banquet—this could be an international incident. She thought it was naive to imagine that only the culprit would be punished.

Basen gave her a sour look. "Why do these things always happen to Consort Lishu?" he said. It was hard to tell whether he was asking himself or Maomao, and she wasn't sure what to say, so she stayed silent. But she thought, *Maybe she was just born into it.*

Maomao hated to wave everything away with words like "destiny," but it did seem to her that some people had better luck than others. This especially struck her when she considered her adoptive father Luomen. He was smarter and more capable than anybody, but he seemed to utterly lack good fortune. He was now back working at the palace, but it seemed this had only prompted the fox strategist to drop in on him with some regularity, interrupting his work. The situation must have been dire if it was bad enough for him to remark upon in his letters. He'd written that recently, one of his medicine cabinets had found itself turned inside out. Maomao couldn't imagine why.

"Isn't it all just too pitiful to bear?" Basen said.

He's really worried about her, Maomao thought, but she decided not to say anything out loud. Commenting on that which would better go unnoticed was a sure route to more headaches.

Still, it was true that the consort, in her consort-ish way, had her problems. Fundamentally, she always simply allowed herself to be swept along. Maomao knew that was somewhat inevitable—it was how Lishu had been raised and it was how she had always lived. Yet Maomao couldn't help thinking of the young woman who had come to the pleasure district to sell herself as a courtesan. She'd done it in order to cut ties with her father, to help her sister eat, and to pull herself out of the muck. Maomao couldn't bring herself to hate a personality like that.

If the consort had half that much drive... Well, maybe she would

have suffered a lot less bullying from her half-sister, and maybe she wouldn't be mocked so much at the rear palace.

Anyway, that was enough preliminaries. It was time for Maomao to find out exactly why Basen had come to her. "Is there something you'd like me to do, sir?" she asked.

"Yes... There is," Basen said, and took out a piece of paper. It looked like a wanted poster, but something puzzled Maomao.

"What's this mean?"

"That's what I'd like to know. This is the woman she said gave her the perfume."

The sketch on the paper did indeed appear to depict a woman, but her face was veiled so that only her eyes were visible. To compensate, the sketch included her entire body, but although the details of her clothes were carefully drawn, she could obviously just change outfits.

"Is she a merchant?"

"No, apparently she just started talking to the half-sister while she was doing some shopping in town."

In town, huh? Maomao listened to Basen's story doubtfully.

"The woman claimed to deal in perfumes, and she recommended several different scents to the half-sister. This one was among them." Supposedly, the "merchant" had told her that the perfume could attract men, but to be careful how she used it. The smell would be too strong unless it were properly diluted, the half-sister was told—in fact, some people had even been known to use it in pranks. This, it seemed, was where the half-sister had gotten the idea for her little joke.

"That story's a little vague," Maomao said.

"Very true. It's not much to go on. And tracking down this perfume seller would be difficult at best."

Maomao squinted, studying the picture. The outfit, characteristic of the western capital, was designed to protect against sand and dust, so it left very little exposed—which is to say, it concealed any distinguishing bodily features. But Maomao's sharp eyes noticed one thing in particular. "For as simple as this drawing is, the accessories on the shoes have an awful lot of detail."

Basen took another look at the image. "Now that you mention it, that's true. In fact, the size of the feet seems off compared to the rest of the body." The person's body had been drawn to a more or less normal scale, but her feet appeared twisted, almost stylized.

“Do you think there’s any chance she had bound feet?” Maomao asked.

“Bound feet?”

Foot-binding was a way of forcibly making the feet smaller than they would naturally be. A few of the women in the rear palace had had it done to them—it was a fairly common custom in the north, but what about here in the west? If the half-sister hadn’t given it much thought, it suggested foot-binding wasn’t unusual.

“Could you double-check this drawing for me?”

“I will,” Basen said, collecting the picture. He was about to leave when he turned back as if he had just remembered something. “By the way...”

“Yes, sir?”

“Master Jinshi has looked...odd since last night. Do you happen to know anything about it? I think he would normally have come on an errand like this himself, but instead he chose to send me.”

Maomao didn’t say anything.

“Have you heard anything about him...I don’t know, being under pressure from anybody? Anything?”

Maomao averted her gaze. Basen was right—she knew he would never normally come to her unless Jinshi had specifically asked him to.

She decided to play dumb. “Who knows?” she said. “Perhaps he’s tired. It has been a very long trip.”

Basen’s report came back in less than thirty minutes. The half-sister had evidently been insisting to her lady-in-waiting that she had “nothing to do with this” and “never meant for this to happen,” but Maomao, frankly, didn’t care. Basen came back in a huff, quite angry about all of it.

“It’s just as you said,” he told her. The woman had indeed had bound feet, and had been wearing special shoes because of it—a distinctive detail that stuck in the mind, and which the half-sister had subconsciously emphasized as she described the woman for the artist, even if she never specifically said that the woman had bound feet. “That narrows it down.”

“To just a few people, I would say, sir,” Maomao replied.

“You think?”

In Li, the custom of foot-binding was found primarily in the north; here in the west, in fact, it hardly existed. Thus, if someone

with bound feet were encountered in the western capital, it seemed safe to assume they had come from points north. Or at the very least, that their family had settled here sometime in the last couple of generations.

"The point is, their household must already have had the custom."

Basen looked dubious. "You don't think she might have been a traveler?"

Maomao shook her head at that idea. "If she was, she would have to be the daughter of a household that could afford to send her in style, like Consort Lishu."

It was a long way to the western capital, and binding twisted the feet into shapes that were, let it be said, not conducive to walking on sandy ground. The process of foot-binding involved forcibly preventing the growth of the feet from a young age, and leaving them bound throughout life so they wouldn't get any bigger. The feet had to be disinfected every few days, such that Maomao sold alcohol to the courtesans with bound feet.

All of which meant that if someone born in the western capital had bound feet, she must have belonged to a family large or wealthy enough to continue the tradition.

"And you're sure about that?"

"I take no responsibility for anything. I've only offered what I think is the most likely possibility in light of the information I've been given."

She couldn't have them expecting perfection of her. If they were only going to permit correct answers, then Maomao would have no choice but to shut her mouth and swear she didn't know anything.

"All right," Basen said after a moment, resigned to her conditions. He finally left the room.

Maomao yawned and sat on her bed, thinking about getting settled again.

Perfection... Yeah, not likely. Maomao herself still had several questions. Would Lishu's high-handed half-sister deign to speak to someone she had only just met—let alone buy something from them? And how had this mysterious seller known about the half-sister? It was a little too neat for mere coincidence.

Hmm...

Whatever. Maomao decided to go ahead and get some sleep. She was so tired she could barely make her brain work. She lay

down, but the hair stick at her chest nudged against her. She thought about pulling it out, but she didn't want it somewhere she could see it.

Without a word, Maomao flipped over and lay on her other side, and promptly closed her eyes.

Chapter 2: The Floating Bride (Part One)

It was already evening when Maomao opened her eyes again. She'd meant to go shopping in town today—they'd said it was acceptable to leave the compound as long as she went with a bodyguard—but after everything that had happened the night before, it was hard to feel like going to market. She slept as long as she was able, and when she woke she was left with a clinging lethargy.

Oh! She looked at her wrinkled clothes in mild dismay, wondering if she should have changed into her sleepwear. First things first, though: she drank some water to rejuvenate her dried-out body. The water in the carafe was lukewarm, but a dash of citrus in it made it refreshing.

I wonder what we're doing about dinner tonight, she thought. Thinking maybe she should go outside and see what was going on, she tried to brush the wrinkles out of her skirt. She got it to where it was just about presentable and stepped out of her room, only to find Jinshi and Basen coming down the hallway toward her.

Some considered Maomao capable of being quite brazen, but at that moment she felt distinctly awkward. The night before, having done what she'd done to Jinshi, she'd then excused herself on the pretext that she heard Lahan calling her. But that didn't mean she could try to hide back in her room now.

Jinshi's face as he approached was unusually haggard; he had a furrow in his brow worthy of Gaoshun, and his gaze was fixed—on Maomao, it seemed. The look lasted only for an instant before his usual calm expression returned. Basen, though, was looking at Jinshi with distress—so something *was* up.

Jinshi came toward her with footsteps that sounded inordinately loud.

What do I do here? Maomao wondered, but there was no time to think about it. The most she could do was to treat him normally.

She bobbed her head in a polite nod and said, “Is something the matter, sir?”

Typically, the appropriate thing for a serving woman would be to speak only after Jinshi had spoken to her—but Maomao judged that it might be best for her to talk first at this moment. Jinshi’s mouth twisted, a conflicted look passing across his face, but it was hard to say if anyone else noticed it.

“I know it’s sudden, but I want you to change and come with me,” was all he said, and then he swept past her. Behind him came several serving women, holding up a box with a change of clothes and bowing their heads deeply.

“Yes, sir,” Maomao replied. Under the circumstances, it was the only thing she could say.

After she’d changed, she was hustled into a carriage. Jinshi and Basen, also in fresh outfits, were already inside.

Maomao glanced around. She’d spent most of her time here in Lahan’s company—was it all right for her to act on her own with Jinshi and Basen?

“It was I who called you here, you see,” Jinshi said. “Considering that our schedules were aligned for this very purpose, we could hardly not go.” However he might be feeling about her, he at least had the wherewithal to talk normally to her. She was glad he was adult enough for that, but she couldn’t help feeling there was something lurking behind his “It was I.”

“And where are we going, sir?”

“To a wedding banquet for a certain household.” Another banquet. Well, apparently this was part of the job. “I had intended to refuse, but the host insisted, this being such a joyous occasion. And besides...”

“Yes, sir?”

Jinshi gave Basen a significant look, and he pulled out the wanted poster he’d shown Maomao earlier.

“I gather that the family of the young woman to be married originally came from the north. They were one of the houses charged with ruling this area after the destruction of the Yi clan.”

The Yi clan had governed these lands once, until they were exterminated in the time of the empress regnant. That would mean this family had been transplanted here several decades before.

“The young lady’s feet are bound,” Jinshi informed her. As

she'd suspected.

"Was there no one besides this...young lady?" That was something Maomao wanted to be particularly sure about—she couldn't go accusing people of being criminals on nothing more than an assumption.

"Several," Jinshi said. "One of the young woman's ladies-in-waiting, for example. The real issue is whom the woman is getting married to—they say he's from Shaoh."

"I see."

It was a delegation from Shaoh that had brought the lion—and perhaps who had rigged the cage to break.

"Most importantly of all, the young woman is to set out on a journey tomorrow." Today, they would hold the marriage feast—and then the next day, she would set out for her husband's country.

"That seems rather hasty."

"Or rather deliberate."

So apparently they wanted Maomao to find some kind of proof of wrongdoing. "And if I'm unable to find anything?"

"We'll have to come up with another way. My stay here may be extended." The desire to avoid that was written on Jinshi's face. He'd already been away from the capital for close to a month, and the work the Emperor's younger brother had to do would have been piling up all that time. Yet they had to find this culprit. "This could also adversely affect the U clan, and I'd like to avoid that."

"I'm not confident I'll find anything," Maomao said. She wanted to be clear about that much.

"I understand." Jinshi turned to gaze out the window, and didn't look at her again for the rest of the ride.

They arrived at another mansion built near an oasis. The style was rather different from that of Empress Gyokuyou's family home; this building looked more like something that might be found back east. The building itself, and the garden it boasted, wouldn't have looked out of place in the capital.

As they went to the gate and proceeded down a flagstone path, they found water flowing by on both sides. Willow trees swayed gently, making the place look refreshing, while open-air pavilions with vermilion posts and yellow roofs dotted the estate. There was a large pond in which lotus leaves floated. The surface of the water rippled occasionally, and each time a pebble fell into a canal, there

was a splashing of fish.

Carp?

Carp were a hardy species, but Maomao was impressed the household was able to keep them in such a desiccated environment.

"Was this house left behind by the Yi clan?" Jinshi wondered aloud. If these people had been sent to replace an annihilated clan who'd lived in the lap of luxury, they might understandably have simply moved into the extant mansion. It was certainly an opulent place, but there was something sad about it too. Empress Gyokuyou's home—Gyokuen's mansion—was lively and bustling; this residence felt subdued.

As they crossed the bridge over the lake, they saw someone coming the other direction, bowing obsequiously. "My apologies for being so late in greeting you," the person said. He must have been the master of the house. He was plump, his hairline beginning to recede. Behind him was a woman they took to be his wife. Her feet were small, and her shoes strangely shaped.

"I'm sure my daughter will be overjoyed to receive the congratulations of the Night Prince."

The Night Prince? Maomao wondered. She surmised the term referred to Jinshi. Not many people in this land could refer to him by his actual name, but it seemed to involve the character for "moon"—hence, perhaps, this nickname.

"If I may welcome you in, then," the man continued, ushering them toward the building. A carpet had been laid out in the pavilion, and a small boat and lanterns floated on the lake. It was only dusk now, but when darkness fell it would look eerie.

"Hey. This way," Basen called to Maomao.

Jinshi was seated beside the master, while next in line sat Gyokuen, apparently also an invited guest of the wedding.

"We pushed the matter a little to get you here," Basen explained, apropos of the seating. "That's really where Consort Lishu should have been. That's why you're a ways off. I'll have a lady-in-waiting assigned to you—use her if you need anything."

So that was why Maomao's seat appeared to have been prepared in haste. A woman who certainly did look like a lady-in-waiting appeared from behind Basen as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

There were several other women there besides Maomao, but all of them had large, healthy feet. One of the seats of honor was

occupied by a middle-aged man with hair that almost shone and sharp, angular facial features. A foreigner. In the other seat was a young woman wearing a veil over her head. Dressed all in white, she sat as still and silent as a doll.

Is that her? Maomao thought. She looked pliant enough—but it could be an act.

Resisting the urge to go for the alcohol, Maomao drank some juice. It was somewhat unusual to hold a banquet like this outside, at night, but the food and the music all seemed basically familiar. Maomao was frankly tired of banquets, and she didn't feel the need to appraise this one very thoroughly. She was just going to enjoy some good food and keep an eye on the bride.

Ugh, what's going on here?

Since they'd brought Maomao along, she did feel she ought to find something for them—but so far she hadn't had a single chance to act. First one person had spoken to her a little while before, and then it was like the dam had burst; people wouldn't *stop* talking to her. Why? Because she was Jinshi's companion, she surmised. Everyone was smiling and sipping wine, but deep in their eyes the emotions burned—ambition in the eyes of the men, jealousy in those of the women.

It wasn't lost on Maomao that this could be why Jinshi had brought her along: to show her what it was like to attend a function with the Emperor's younger brother, and not as his serving lady, as she'd done before.

Ugh. No, no!

Was it selfish of her to wish he would just act normal, not let the events of the previous night change how he treated her? She wanted her relationship with him to be professional, the way it had always been as each of them used and was used by the other. That was what would be best for Maomao at this moment.

"A most modest young lady you are," someone said.

Maomao didn't specifically respond. A veil covered most of her face—and she did a lot of her talking through the serving woman who had been assigned to her to help ensure she didn't say anything untoward. The nasty edge of pleasure-district talk had reentered her speech lately, after all.

If that's how it looks to you, fine, she thought. She let her gaze wander to the seats at the center of the banquet to discover that

somewhere along the line, the bride had disappeared. Maomao's lady-in-waiting seemed to sense where her attention had gone, for she whispered in her ear, "I gather she's gone to freshen her makeup."

Maomao got up, thinking she might use the restroom herself, but she was trapped, surrounded by people who couldn't seem to take a hint. She glanced over at Jinshi and Basen, who appeared to be in the same situation. Basen was glumly receiving pours of alcohol from various women—perhaps it would have been ungenerous to press him about whether his face was red from the drinks or for some other reason.

As Maomao was busy trying to think of a suitable excuse to get out of there, there was a great boom. She turned to find everyone around her looking toward the source of the noise.

The lantern-laden boat on the lake was shining brighter than ever. Fireworks were flying across the water, obviously the source of the noise. So the evening had been set to include fireworks.

"Hah! Gorgeous! I love it!" a drunken man proclaimed, working his way unsteadily out of the pavilion. He waded into the pond (what was he thinking?) and grabbed one of the carp with both hands. "Gorgeous! I love it! I wish this were snapper, but I won't *carp* about it!"

It was a terrible joke, but in any event he gave the fish to a friend and said, "Would you have this cooked up for me?"

The servant obviously wasn't sure how to respond to that particular request, but was rescued by the head of the house, the father of the bride. "Hey, you!" he said. "I know this is a joyous occasion for your niece, but that's no excuse to go making an ass of yourself. Everyone's looking."

"Ha ha ha! Hullo, Elder Brother! No, it's all good."

"The Night Prince must be appalled."

Jinshi, the one who had suddenly been invoked, was smiling. Merely a polite smile, no doubt, but it was enough to enrapture all those around him, who, despite his injury, still felt he reminded them of a celestial nymph.

"I do pity that poor fish. Why not put it back?" he said. The party had become a free-for-all, notwithstanding the presence of the Emperor's younger brother. Such a scene would have been unthinkable in the capital.

Everyone was smiling and laughing at the exchange. The carp

was returned to the pond and somehow escaped without being cooked that evening. Still, it couldn't have been easy for the fish, first with fireworks going off right over their heads, then being grabbed by inebriated partygoers. Maomao looked at the dark water. She tried dropping some breadcrumbs in, but there was no sign of the fish coming to get them. All the commotion must have scared them away.

With the addition of more alcohol, the party became ever freer, yet still the bride hadn't returned. Jinshi had taken notice of that fact by now, and he and the bridegroom were both eyeing the vacant seat.

"Perhaps tonight's star has gone to make herself shine even brighter?" Jinshi ventured. Hadn't the girl's uncle said that the bride was going to fix her makeup? Most of the women in the crowd didn't seem to buy it; the ladies-in-waiting had largely left the banquet area.

Not long after, one of them returned in a panic. Her face was pale and she could hardly speak; she could only point toward the far side of the lake.

Well, now...

Maomao caught a burning smell, and then she heard shouting. She turned toward the yelling to see one of the guests, who was himself looking in the direction the lady-in-waiting was pointing. His mouth was flapping open and shut like one of the carp, and he was pointing to the sky with a trembling finger. No—not the sky, but a building in a corner of the estate, a four-tiered pagoda. Something was faintly visible on the highest floor.

"The y-y-young mistress is...hanging..." the lady-in-waiting finally managed. All the guests who had been enjoying themselves at the banquet collectively turned pale.

The dim silhouette could be seen dangling from the roof of the pagoda, its feet swaying gently back and forth. The white bridal gown billowed like a cloud.

"To the tower!" Jinshi said; he and Basen were the first to act. The bridegroom, the bride's father, and her uncle followed him belatedly, and Maomao joined them in heading for the pagoda at a run. They crossed the verdant garden, the smoke from the fireworks obscuring and diffusing the light from the lanterns floating in the canal. They could hear the carp splashing.

The pagoda was clearly visible, but there was no straight path

between them and it. Trees and other buildings stood in their way, obstacles they had to work their way around to reach their destination. With their way well lit by the lanterns, at least they wouldn't fall.

Maomao entered the pagoda a few steps behind the others and raced up the stairs. She reached the top floor panting, to find the men staring disbelievingly at the dangling rope: it had snapped.

"Find her! Check the ground around the pagoda!" Basen roared and set off back down the stairs. He might be a somewhat simple personality, but at least he was decisive at moments like this.

The others, taking their cue from him, headed back down, but Jinshi was still looking outside. They were perhaps four *jo* (twelve meters) off the ground. If the girl had been strangled by the rope but it had then snapped, what were the chances she'd survived?

Just about zero, I'd say, Maomao thought. Whether her neck had broken or whether she'd suffocated, no one could survive hanging there that long. On the floor by the swaying rope was a pair of small shoes worked with embroidery—they had belonged to the bride.

"What do you make of it?" Jinshi asked, looking from the rope to the ground and back. The rope was tied under the eaves, and the other end had snapped off. Looking down, they could see the roofs overlapping. Maybe the girl had tumbled over them on her way down.

"I don't know," Maomao said honestly, and Jinshi smiled.

"I wheedled the truth out of her," Jinshi murmured. "Is this what I've wrought?" He had been sitting at the central seat at the banquet and could have said something to the bride. He glanced down, and just for a second, he looked as if he were chewing sand. He turned his back on the little shoes, but he didn't look up. "Do you think me a terrible person?"

After a second Maomao said, "I don't know, sir." Jinshi had only done his job. Somebody would have had to sooner or later, or the culprit would have fled to the west. And they had to avoid that.

Unable to think of anything else to say, Maomao remained silent.

Finally Jinshi said, "Let's go," and his voice was cold.

"Yes, sir." Maomao descended the steps slowly, nursing a question as she worked her way down the steep staircase.

It wasn't long before they found the bride, but she was in no shape to be seen. Her white robe was singed; her arms and legs, bent at unsettling angles, were likewise blackened; and her head had been broken open. But they found the rope around her neck, and recognized her small, misshapen feet. She had been soaked in lantern oil that had then been set alight. It was more than enough to make the intoxicated guests feel very sober indeed.

Chapter 3: The Floating Bride (Part Two)

"If it's not one problem it's another, isn't it?" Ah-Duo said darkly. Originally, she and Maomao had planned to go shopping today, but after the events of the previous night, this would be another day with no sightseeing. Maomao had been looking forward to discovering what unusual things were on offer in the western capital, but it was not to be; instead she was dressed in somber clothing. Of all the things she'd thought might happen on this trip, she had never imagined she would be attending a funeral.

"I have to admit, I'm not sorry that it means no banquet tonight, but I wish it were under other circumstances," Ah-Duo said, sipping her tea. So it wasn't just Maomao who'd been feeling the strain of the nightly parties. Only she, Ah-Duo, and Suirei were in the room at the moment, which was why Ah-Duo could make a somewhat indiscreet comment like that. Suirei was permitted to go without her minder while in Ah-Duo's company, but Maomao doubted the reserved young woman found it exactly relaxing. Ah-Duo for one loved amusements, entertainments, and interesting things, so she was probably forever teasing the eternally serious Suirei.

"Cornered until she felt the only way out was to kill herself... It's a tragedy," Ah-Duo said.

Suicide: that had been the official conclusion. A note had been found in the young woman's personal chamber, stating that the reason for her death was distress at the idea of moving to a faraway foreign land. The boisterous mood at the banquet had chilled immediately, and the groom was beside himself when he saw the note. He began to tear into the bride's father; most of what he said was in a foreign language and incomprehensible to Maomao, although it was clear enough that it wouldn't have borne repeating if she could have understood it. The residents of the western capital seemed to know what the man was saying, but they only stared

sadly at the ground.

Jinshi had shown her the note, and Maomao was convinced that it had indeed been written by the bride.

She didn't say anything about being cornered, though...

Ah-Duo came across as very much like Empress Gyokuyou; Maomao saw that this former consort was not to be underestimated—it was one of her subordinates who had found the perfume as well. But Maomao didn't know exactly how much Ah-Duo knew, so she had to be careful about what she said.

Here was how it looked: distraught by her marriage, the bride had killed herself, making certain everyone saw her hanging from the pagoda before the rope snapped and she fell to the ground. Not only that, but she happened to upset a lantern when she landed, causing her clothes to catch fire.

But was that the truth of the matter? Jinshi seemed to think it was something he had done that had caused the young woman's suicide, but there was no way for Maomao to know. There was a distinct possibility this was the woman who had given Consort Lishu's half-sister the perfume—but that was something else about which there was no certainty. Thus Maomao would attend the funeral with things still shrouded in ambiguity. True, she might have been able to refuse if she'd insisted, but there was something that nagged at her.

Jinshi was going too. He wouldn't normally have had any reason to attend the funeral of the daughter of a local official, but the bride's father had pleaded with him to come. It was Jinshi and Gyokuen whose presence had quelled the raging bridegroom. They learned later that what the groom had shouted was: *"This is twice now! Can you get me a* third *bride?!"*

Twice, huh? Maomao thought. It was fairly simple to deduce that behind this seemingly ordinary marriage, something was afoot.

"It's almost time, ma'am," Maomao said, rising from her chair.

"Ah, of course." Ah-Duo set down her tea and glanced at Maomao. "Incidentally, if you'll forgive me..."

"Yes, ma'am?" Maomao looked back at her with curiosity. It was an unusually reserved way for Ah-Duo to speak.

"If the Night Prince is going, I suppose that attendant of his will be with him, yes?"

"I should think so."

They were referring to Jinshi's aide and bodyguard, Basen. He'd

broken the fingers of his right hand when he struck the lion, but at the time he had been so totally worked up that even the fact that his fingers were pointing in unnatural directions couldn't overcome his frenzy.

"Are we sure about him? I've heard he's Gaoshun's son. What's your read on him?"

After a second Maomao said, "I believe that's for Master Jinshi to decide, and not my place to comment on."

Basen's physical prowess certainly left nothing to be desired, but personally he still had some growing to do. Though admittedly, Maomao's opinion of him in that respect might have been colored by having seen Gaoshun at work. Anyway, she tried to be optimistic: it wasn't like Basen was Jinshi's only bodyguard or personal aide. So it would be fine, right?

"You really don't feel you're in a position to say anything?" Ah-Duo looked grim. Suirei poured fresh hot water into Ah-Duo's empty cup.

"No, ma'am. It's not something I have any influence over."

"Understood."

Maomao left the room, casting a mystified glance at Ah-Duo as she went.

This was the sort of thing a family might usually have wished to handle quietly, but with the young lady's death having been such a public affair, the funeral could hardly be a private one.

As the family's estate came into view, they could see a river of white-clad women streaming into it. Wailing women, to judge by their veils. Quite a few of them, Maomao observed. There were wreaths of flowers all over, as well as servants coming out with heads bowed to meet the guests.

Maomao wasn't certain that the custom of wailing women existed here in the western reaches, but the family had bound the young woman's feet, so they might well observe funerary customs in the manner of the capital as well.

At the reception desk, the number of wailing women was confirmed, and they were given wooden tags that served as identification.

"Come on, this way. Let's go," a servant said, and the women followed him.

This time Lahan had joined Maomao and the others. Their

baggage included money and household goods made of paper.

"Don't they use the real thing?" Maomao asked.

"Maybe if you're *new* money," Lahan sniffed. Well then. He hadn't prepared paper items simply because he was a skinflint. It was customary for attendees at a funeral to give money and daily sundries made of paper, which would be burned to ensure the deceased could lead a comfortable existence even in the next life. Even one's stay in hell, it was often said, could be shortened by an infusion of cash.

Lahan had grumbled about being left out of the banquet and only dragged to the funeral, but it was what it was. With him here, Maomao didn't have to stay in Jinshi's orbit. Rikuson wasn't present; he had stayed behind. He probably had his own job to do.

"Anyway, it's very good paper. No low-quality scrap."

True, the material for the paper money was excellent. It could have stood proudly alongside anything from the quack doctor's village, although Maomao didn't know if it came from them or not. When she'd seen the young woman's suicide note, though, she'd had the thought that the western capital seemed to have a lot of awfully good paper.

"That's because this place is a crossroads of trade," Lahan told her. "Nobody sends their worst goods out into the world."

Li had in fact once exported paper, at a time when its products were said to fetch a good price even in the west. When low-quality products began to proliferate, the export business all but died off, but apparently there was still good stuff to be had.

The day before, they had been at the mansion amidst the evening dim, and now, in the daylight, Maomao could see a few places where the estate was falling into disrepair. This had once been a lavish mansion, but its new owners lacked the ability to maintain it.

A marriage with someone from Shaoh, she reflected. That seemed odd too. Important for diplomacy, perhaps, but the balance of power struck her as skewed. For example, the banquet had been held here, but everything else about the marriage was to be handled in the groom's land. And the way the man had behaved after the death of his bride could only be called contemptuous.

Lahan, it seemed, was already privy to the story, which he shared with Maomao on the way.

"This family was brought here to replace the Yi clan, but also,

so I gather, to get them out of the way."

The mother of the former emperor—that is to say, the empress regnant—had been a pragmatist. She regarded officials who couldn't do their job as a nuisance, even if they boasted good bloodlines from the central region of the nation. She'd lured several families to the western reaches with promises of a family name if they went to oversee the area. The bride's family had been one of them.

But incompetent people don't suddenly become competent thanks to a simple change of scenery. Some of the families were decimated by disease in the unfamiliar climate; others were reduced to ruin and disappeared.

Why would the empress regnant have done something that seemed so rash when the western lands were widely acknowledged to be crucial to national defense? Perhaps because at that time, she had been at the height of her powers, and if a few families fell, well, others were rising to take their place. Empress Gyokuyou's family, for example.

The young woman at yesterday's marriage feast was supposed to strengthen her family by going to another country as a bride. This family preferred to do business where they had blood relations; creating those relations by marrying their daughters off was how the household had chosen to survive down the years.

"The groom was actually supposed to be married to the cousin of the girl who died. The daughter of the younger brother of the head of the household, I believe," Lahan said. Was the younger brother in question, then, the overwatered man from the carp pond? Maybe he'd been celebrating as if it were his own daughter's wedding. "She killed herself ten days before the ceremony."

"He didn't look like a man who had suffered that sort of tragedy..."

"There are many things in this world that demand us to put on our best face, whether we wish to or not," Lahan said.

So that was what had been behind the groom's remark about "twice now." And to think, he had lost both would-be wives in the exact same way. They must have thought that foreign land was truly terrible.

Lahan's and Maomao's footsteps sounded as they walked along the flagstones, their feet dampened by the spray from the carp splishing in the canal. The fish (who had a terrible diet, for fish)

came and gathered when they heard visitors approach; the refreshing sound of splashing water increased.

There was already a crowd in front of the mansion, the troupe of wailing women keening loudly. Maomao recognized many of the attendees from the day before.

Look at them all, she thought. Partly she meant the attendees, but what really stood out were the women in white. There must have been more than fifty of them setting up a racket of grief and mourning. Maybe some of the guests had brought wailers along as a courtesy, but it still seemed like a lot. It was these women's job to lament for the dead, but Maomao had the sense they were holding back a little this time, perhaps because if all of them had wailed at the tops of their lungs, you wouldn't have been able to hear yourself think. It was an unwelcome reminder that they were, in fact, mourning as a job.

With so many women present, some of them were bound to be better at the job than others. A few of them sounded a little embarrassed—they must still be new at this. Another stumbled on the long hem of her outfit.

It had to be a challenge, keeping up with the crying all the way through the long, long funeral ceremony, and from time to time the front and back rows of women would switch places. They seemed to be switching off crying duties, conserving their stamina. It was hard to say whether such efficiency-minded wailers would really bring peace to the dead, but personally Maomao didn't believe there was anything after the point of death, anyway. And these women did have to eat.

Maomao looked up. Out beyond the garden, she could see the four-storied pagoda. She wondered if it might be possible to get a different perspective on it in the day than at night. She started walking forward and almost fell into a canal she'd failed to notice. She grabbed onto Lahan, who was standing next to her.

"What are you doing?" he snapped.

"Sorry." Even if she had fallen in, the canal wasn't that deep, but the carp had already arrived, drawn by the noise. The night before, the floating lanterns had saved anyone from falling in, but it was a moderately dangerous terrain feature, she reflected.

It was quite a distance to the pagoda, and yesterday they'd not only run over there but run all the way up the steps as well. It had been rough.

Steps? The distance to the pagoda? Maomao remembered that something had felt off the night before. What was it? She almost had it...

"Hey, you! She's not food!" Lahan joked. The carp, paying him no mind, continued to bloop at her, hoping for crumbs. Just then there was a gust of wind, and some of the money for the dead fell into the canal. The carp were on it in an instant, and it was swiftly gone without a trace.

Maomao didn't say anything, just stared at the fish.

"What are you doing? They're not food either. You can't fish here."

He sounded like he was joking again, but she stuck out her hand toward him. "Paper."

"Paper?"

"I know you keep some scratch paper with you. Give me a sheet."

"What brings this on?" Lahan grumbled, but nonetheless he produced the paper from the folds of his robe. Maomao tore it up and dropped it into the canal, where the carpet greedily consumed it again.

Maomao's mouth hung open for a second, and then she said, "That's it!" She set out at a brisk trot toward the pagoda.

"H-Hey!" Lahan exclaimed.

The place where the bride had been hanging from the pagoda could be seen from the pavilion where the wedding feast had been held, but as you got closer, it dropped out of view.

Maomao picked up her pace, running until she could see the pond directly underneath the tower.

"Wh-What *are* you after? What's going on?" Lahan panted as he caught up to her. Maomao lifted up the hem of her dress and waded into the pond. There was a short distance between the pagoda and the water; that was where the bride's body had been found.

"When a person falls out of a window, Lahan, where do they drop?" she asked.

"Down, usually," he said.

Yes, and that was where they'd found the charred corpse. However...

"What if it was something lighter than a person? Say the wind speed and direction were roughly like they are now."

"It would depend on the weight."

"Less than two *kin*, but about the size of a human."

"In that case..." Lahan adjusted his glasses, eyeballing the distance. He licked his finger and held it up to the wind. "Slightly farther out from the building than where you are, I would guess. And if we take the position of the roof into account..."

Right, the roof. If you bring that into it, there's something that doesn't make sense. Now that she could see it in the light, she was sure of it.

Lahan looked at the scorched patch of ground where the body had been discovered, then at the roof. Then he cocked his head. Of course—if Maomao could figure it out, this human abacus couldn't fail to notice it. If he'd been there the night before, he would have detected the inconsistency long before she had.

Maomao moved to the place Lahan had indicated, then rolled up her sleeves and plunged her hands into the water, digging around on the pond bottom. Lahan, meanwhile, had sat down, evidently intent on observing the situation. He had a little twig in hand to keep himself busy, with which he was writing on the ground. Calculating something, perhaps.

"What are you doing, ma'am?!" cried a servant who had noticed the guest playing around in the pond. Reprehensible behavior at a home that was observing a funeral, surely. "Please, get out of there right now!"

"Don't mind me," Maomao said, ignoring the man and reaching into the pond again. The bottom was muddy; excellent fertilizer. Lots of fish poop that had infused it with nutrients.

"You heard the lady," Lahan said diffidently, but the servant continued to try to stop Maomao. Maomao continued to ignore him, carrying on with her digging. If and when she found what she expected to find, all would be resolved.

Lahan wasn't getting in her way, but he wasn't exactly helping either, just glancing around now and then. Maomao could hear the servant splashing into the pond behind her. She felt him pull on her hand. She tried to run, but her feet caught in the mud and she went headfirst into the water. She ended up covered in filth, with the servant trying to get a hold of her.

At just that moment, however, a gorgeous, carrying voice said, "Have you found anything?"

You'd think he was waiting *for the perfect moment to make his entrance*, Maomao thought. Jinshi had appeared. Basen stood

behind him, looking aghast.

Maomao wiped the mud off her face and held up a piece of rope, the end of which had snapped. *Which would mean the bride...*

In her head, Maomao went over what she knew. There was another mysterious thing about this mansion—and if she could reveal the truth of it, the mystery would be solved.

"The bride is still alive," she announced, and grinned.

Maomao asked for a room in which to clean herself off and change clothes. She would have loved a proper bath, but they didn't have the time. She hated the feeling of mud clinging to her scalp, but she was just going to have to grin and bear it.

Once she was changed, she was shown into the mansion's main room. The master of the estate and his family shot her dirty looks as she came in, clearly unhappy about a guest behaving so outrageously at a funeral. Jinshi and Basen were there, along with Lahan and the bodyguards, but she didn't see the bridegroom from yesterday. In fact, she didn't think she had seen him participating in the funeral at all.

Lying on the table was the piece of rope Maomao had discovered. She looked out the window and saw the women in white, still busy crying. The funeral rites would continue until tomorrow, so perhaps the ladies would stay here for the night. The other guests had gone home; only those women, the people who lived in this house, and Maomao's party remained.

"May I ask what in the world you think you're doing?" said the despondent master of the house. He seemed less angry than simply overwhelmed with grief.

"This young woman will explain everything," Jinshi said, ushering Maomao to the center of the room. The rope on the table was filthy, yet nonetheless obviously still new.

"I know she's supposed to be a lady of the La family, but we're grieving the death of our child," the master said. "Could you not leave us in peace? Surely even the Night Prince..." He was being circumspect, but he was unmistakably criticizing Jinshi. The way he trembled as he did so indicated how much courage it must have taken.

"Yes, and I must apologize for intruding on your sorrow. However, if we could ask for but a moment of your time," Jinshi said; he was gentle, but firm.

“The guests have gone home and we must clean up. Might I at least dismiss the wailing women?”

Jinshi glanced at Maomao, but she shook her head. Jinshi took a step back as if to say he was trusting her to handle things from here on.

Maomao said, “I would feel the same way you do—*if* the bride had really died.” Then she picked up the rope and went outside. “Come with me.”

“What’s this all about?” the host fumed, but Maomao ignored him and went and stood in front of the women in white. The others watched her, perplexed, as she crouched down.

With a “Hiyah!” she grabbed two of the wailing women’s robes, flipping them up.

The spectators’ jaws practically fell on the ground.

The sun was strong in these parts, and people kept their legs hidden, safe from its light, so the limbs Maomao revealed were suitably pale. Growing ever hungrier for daikon, she went along flipping up the ladies’ skirts, the women shouting and shrieking.

This brings back memories, Maomao thought. There had once been a merchant with questionable tastes who had assembled ten or so courtesans and spent an entire night flipping their skirts up. The madam had clucked and complained that it was particularly lowbrow behavior—but the man paid three times the going rate, so she wasn’t about to stop him.

In short, Maomao was essentially behaving just like a sex-crazed old man.

The women whose skirts had been flipped quickly crouched down, trying to hide themselves, while those Maomao hadn't gotten to yet panicked and tried to run.

Well, damn. This is more fun than I expected!

She hadn't understood what was so great about it until she'd done it for herself, chasing the crying women around pulling at the hems of their dresses. She finally started to understand what that lustful old man had been feeling. Well, that wasn't good.

One of the wailing women stood out as not very athletic. She tried to escape but couldn't run, instead tripping and stumbling. Maomao showed no mercy, standing in front of her and flexing her fingers. The woman's shouts echoed around the yard, but Maomao grabbed her skirt.

"You! Learn some blasted manners!" Jinshi exclaimed; he accompanied his injunction with a smack to the back of her head. She turned and saw that he looked thoroughly exasperated.

"I'm very sorry," Maomao said, releasing the handful of skirt she'd gotten. "But I've found what I was looking for."

Peeking out from under the hem of the girl's skirt was a pair of shoes. She'd almost fallen out of them trying to run away, because the size was all wrong. Her feet were wrapped in bandages, and in fact they hardly looked like feet at all.

This wailing woman had bound feet.

Next Maomao took the mourner's veil and slowly pulled it off, revealing a pretty young woman with a tearstained face.

"I'm sorry!" the young woman said, crying. Whoever she was apologizing to, it certainly wasn't Maomao.

"H—" Maomao began, but before she could come out with *Here's your missing bride*, another woman with bound feet threw herself between them. One of the bride's ladies-in-waiting, perhaps?

"What is the meaning of this?! Can't you manage even the most basic decency?!" the second woman shouted at Maomao. Her eyes were open wide in an effort to forestall the tears that threatened to come pouring out of them. She was biting her lip and her shoulders were trembling. Then she straightened the other woman's skirt and put the veil back on her head. "Get going, quickly. We have work again tomorrow."

With the bound feet revealed, though, the woman wasn't going

to get away—Maomao, and now Jinshi, wouldn't let her. They couldn't have her fleeing on them. It was that thought that inspired the cruel words Maomao spoke next.

"The body you burned. Was it your older sister's? After she killed herself?"

The wailing woman shuddered.

"The body already had marks on its neck. That's why you made such a show of 'hanging' yourself. And then you burned the body so no one could be sure what had happened to it."

The young woman could be heard to sniffle—not in a poor imitation of grief; it was an excellent job of crying, one that would certainly have passed muster during her work.

The bride's father, who'd watched silently until that moment, finally burst out: "Once again, I have no idea what in the world you're talking about! I must ask you not to desecrate my child's funeral any further. There's no way this wailing woman could be my daughter!" He joined the lady-in-waiting in standing in front of Maomao. "It's true, I spoke to you about my little girl, but quite frankly, I wasn't asking you to go poking your nose in every last place!" The man's anger was plain to see.

Then the bride's uncle intervened with much gesticulating, "If the girl is alive, then how do you explain what happened last night? We all saw the bride hang herself. And we found the body on the ground. Those are facts!"

Maomao, though, shook her head. "True enough, the bride hanged herself from the highest level of the pagoda and then fell down. But there's something interesting about that tower. It's four stories, yes? And at first, all of them appear to be the same size—but the lowest level flares out farther than the others. What would happen if something were to fall there?"

Lahan was better at explaining these kinds of things than Maomao was, so she handed him a branch off the ground. He began to sketch a diagram of the tower in the dust. It was the same picture he'd been drawing while Maomao was busy playing in the mud.

"The roof is on an angle, so something that fell on it would roll outward. The force would continue to carry it as it came off the roof," Lahan said, adding an arrow to his diagram by way of explanation. "In other words, if this object came down with undiminished momentum, it would land some distance from the pagoda."

However, the burned body had been directly under the eaves, in a place that was concealed if you were standing at the entrance to the tower. For if it had fallen into the pond, it would no longer have been possible to burn it to throw people off the trail.

"Based on basic principles of movement and the speed of the body, the corpse should not have fallen where we found it," Lahan said. At least he could be counted on at times like this. And the diagram made his explanation easier to understand.

"The burned body was there all along," Maomao concluded. "We were distracted by the 'floating' bride and missed it."

The path to the pagoda had been lit with small lanterns. Guests unfamiliar with the estate, trying to find their way on a dark night, would naturally follow it. And the smoke from the fireworks combined with the smell of the lantern oil was perfect for concealing the already burned body.

Finally Maomao added: "I suspect *this* was the true identity of the dangling bride." She took out some scrap paper and walked toward the pond, deliberately stomping her feet as she went. She tore up the paper and tossed it into the water, which promptly roiled with carp coming to eat it. "There's plenty of excellent paper around here. Stuff that could be made into something that might well pass for a bride's gown when seen from a distance."

What would the signal have been? The fireworks, they would be perfect. Perhaps a special color of smoke or a particular sound. When somebody spotted the hanging bride, the signal would be given. Working backward from the distance to the tower and how long it would take to reach the top floor, the rope would be cut to make it look as if it had snapped. Everyone would be so busy rushing to the pagoda that they wouldn't notice the fall.

"You went in and grabbed one of the carp yesterday," Maomao said to the uncle. "Was that in order to scare the fish away?" Perhaps he had been attempting to drive the paper-eating fish to the desired location. They'd probably been frightened by the fireworks, but why take any chances?

The paper doll would fall into the pond and be eaten by the carp, leaving only the rope Maomao had found in the water. As for the person who had cut the rope, she merely needed to wait for everyone else to arrive at the pagoda. No need to try to rush out and risk bumping into anyone who had come to investigate. Instead, she could simply hide somewhere inside, and once there

was a suitable crowd, she could join the others, slipping in amongst them and looking as if she was as confused as everyone else. They now no longer needed to ask who had played that role.

"If there are any objections to my interpretation of events, perhaps we should check the rope that I found against the piece left over from the tower. Anyone?"

At that word, "anyone," the bride's father fell to his knees, while the others looked at each other with resignation. The lady-in-waiting who had put herself between Maomao and the wild wailing woman wore a pained expression. Yes, of course: the bride couldn't have pulled this off by herself. She must have had accomplices—perhaps her entire household.

The faces of the family members before them were written not with treachery, but with grief.

"You hoped to hide the bride among the ranks of the wailing women, and help her escape that way," Maomao said. It seemed she'd been under an enduring misimpression. Namely, she'd been wrong that the incident with the lion had been targeting Consort Lishu.

Sometimes, what another person was thinking didn't always line up with what you imagined.

"All this to help her get away from that foreign groom."

She'd heard it was the would-be groom who had brought the lion—and if the cage were to break and the lion were to get loose, the blame would fall on him. The family simply had to tamper with the bars of the cage and get the lion-agitating perfume among the attendees of the banquet. It must have been simple chance that one of the people they had chosen happened to be Lishu's half-sister.

Normally, blame for the incident with the lion would have been quickly assigned, and it would have fallen most heavily on the groom. But Jinshi and Gyokuen were more thoroughgoing than the family had expected; rather than immediately escalate things, they had focused on gathering evidence.

The groom, understandably concerned, had decided to leave the country posthaste, planning to depart after the banquet that had been planned for the next day. That was why he wasn't here now: he was already on his way home. If things had been allowed to go on unhampered, the young woman would now be on her way to live as the man's wife in a foreign country. The family, frantic, decided to stage the young woman's death. They were so set on

protecting the young lady that they were even willing to use the corpse of her older sister, who had already died.

"Why did you feel it was necessary to go so far?" Jinshi asked.

"Hah! You have no idea how abominably my daughter was treated," replied the bride's uncle—the father of the dead woman. "Those people see our family's women as nothing but slaves. Do you know what they do on their first night together? They brand the bride. Like an animal!"

Marriages weren't always equal; in fact, more often than not the balance of power leaned in one direction or the other. If you didn't have the power, then the only thing you could do was bow and scrape. This family had already offered up one daughter as such a sacrifice.

"It was the same with these feet of mine," the bride dressed as a wailing woman said, brushing her hand along her own small feet. "This is what that man wanted. He said he wanted me to look like a girl from the east. I doubt he saw me as anything more than a commodity." The lady-in-waiting watched her with agony on her face. Perhaps the bride and even her lady-in-waiting had had their feet bound as potential backups in case the older sister didn't pan out.

The expression disappeared from Jinshi's face, but he seemed privately disturbed.

"I am incompetent. This was the only path open to me. Do you think perhaps, if I'd had more talent or skill, I might have been able to see my daughter become one of the roses in the garden?" the girl's father asked. Perhaps he was thinking of another family, also from the western capital, who had seen their own daughter rise to become Empress.

"If the empress regnant had been pleased with us," the father continued, "do you think we might have escaped being sent to these backwaters?"

Jinshi turned away from the tragic family. They had committed a serious crime. Their attempt to protect their own daughter could have sacrificed many more lives.

"Do you think we might have been able to save our household?"

It wouldn't be possible to let them off with a slap on the wrist.

The one thing Maomao didn't know was whether Jinshi had grown up enough to accept that.

That being said, she couldn't help thinking she saw things differently than they did. "Is a household something that must be saved?" she said quietly, approaching the two bound-footed women as they clung to each other. Despite all the claims of incompetence, something bothered her. "May I ask you something?" she said to the women.

They didn't say anything, and she took their silence as assent.

"I believe that among those to whom you gave the perfume, there was one woman with an arrogant attitude and a mouthful of bad teeth. How did you get to know her?"

The lady-in-waiting looked at the ground. She must have been the one who had made contact with Lishu's half-sister. It was strange: she hadn't seemed like the type to be that friendly with someone she'd just met.

"I don't remember exactly, but she was eighteen or nineteen years old with a somewhat plump behind."

"Her butt measures three *shaku* and one *sun* around," Lahan interjected. (Why?!) Maomao assumed the number was an educated guess, that he was just eyeballing it—but she silently crushed his toes nonetheless.

"I urge you to tell us," Maomao said. "It would be better for everyone."

After a moment, the lady-in-waiting said, "The fortune-teller told me."

"Fortune-teller?"

The other woman nodded, still looking at the ground. "She's been all the talk in the western capital. Everyone's been going to see her."

At first, the lady-in-waiting said, she'd thought it was all just talk. But the fortune-teller's words had shown an uncanny insight into the young woman and her friends, and she'd been drawn deeper and deeper in.

"The dearly departed young mistress used to go to her for advice."

"I'm impressed she was able," Maomao said. She wasn't trying to attack the young woman—it was just a simple doubt that emerged in her mind. The subject of the "advice" wasn't something you could talk about with just anyone.

The lady-in-waiting pointed toward town. "They would talk in the chapel."

It was a place much like the building on Gyokuen's premises dedicated to a foreign religion. There were places within where one could have a private conversation, and the fortune-teller used them to ply her trade. These nooks and crannies were originally, it seemed, for monks of the foreign faith to listen to people, but with the appropriate donation they might be available for private personal conversations as well.

The lady-in-waiting had tried not to be overly specific about her name and identity, but an industrious snoop could find out whom they were talking to. This fortune-teller appeared to have taken advantage of that.

"I was the one who accepted the perfume! And I accepted the advice to tamper with the cage! It was all me!" The lady-in-waiting let her head droop. She'd felt she couldn't let there be any more dead young women simply because they wouldn't listen to the fortune-teller. She looked up at Maomao pleadingly, but Maomao wasn't the one who would hand down judgment.

The fortune-teller had also told her whom to target. She was vague when it came to the names or characteristics of some of the marks, but there were others, like Lishu's half-sister, whom the lady-in-waiting was told about in detail. Ultimately, she sold perfume to around three people.

"The guilt doesn't fall on this young woman alone. It was I who tampered with the cage," said the bride's uncle, stepping forward. He had found the lady-in-waiting in a somber mood and questioned her. Indeed, it seemed like more than one young woman could have done on her own.

"It wasn't just them. The staged suicide was my idea. Even if it meant disturbing my niece's grave," the bride's father said.

"No! Brother, I begged you to do what you did!"

Witnessing this exchange, the women of the family began to set up a terrible cry.

"So all this came not from the fortune-teller, but was your own idea?" Jinshi asked.

"That's right. After what happened yesterday, we didn't have time to meet with the fortune-teller."

"And would this fortune-teller have been able to meet with you?" Jinshi was watching the pitiful family closely. He didn't seem to be thinking of how to punish them, but rather how to connect this to whatever came next.

As he watched the family, Maomao silently watched him.

They never did find the fortune-teller or whoever it was. A monk at the chapel, however, testified to where the diviner had been living. The proverb has it that money talks even in hell—a good donation made the man quite forthcoming.

The residence he pointed them to was totally empty. The only thing they could conclude from what they found there was that the fortune-teller didn't appear to live like someone from the west.

Chapter 4: Homeward Bound

Maomao didn't know how Jinshi would deal with the bride and her family. After everything was over, he spent some time in conversation with Gyokuen, but it was hardly a discussion Maomao could intrude upon. The only thing she could do was hope that worst wouldn't come to worst. Consort Lishu was no longer in confinement, but what to do about her half-sister was a separate matter entirely.

And so, on her sixth day in the western capital, with their departure looming the next day, all Maomao could think was: *I never did get to do any sightseeing.*

That was it. It might sound cold, but it wasn't in Maomao's temperament to ruminate on negative thoughts. Instead she'd been hoping to get out and do something to refresh herself—only to be told it was time to get ready to go home. Thus she found herself in the cactus garden, the fatigue written on her face. She had no idea if the plants would survive in the capital's climate, but she wanted to at least ask for some seeds or a small clipping to take with her. Gyokuen went one step further, being kind enough to call the merchant for them, so she was grateful for that much.

On that note, her stay in the western capital came to an end.

"What in the world is this?" Lahan asked. They were in the carriage on the way home, and he was indicating a bird feather, sharpened and blackened at one end. Supposedly, they didn't use brushes in the west; instead they used metal "pens" or feathers like this one.

Maomao cocked her head. "I think they found it in that fortune-teller's house." There hadn't been much in the way of possessions, but this had been among the limited evidence they'd uncovered. "The Emperor's honored younger brother seemed quite interested in what kind of feather it was. Would you happen to know?"

"Hmm... It's very small. I don't think it belongs to a water bird," Lahan said.

The feather was gray in color, and didn't actually look very suited to being a writing instrument. It was probably a random feather someone had grabbed for a backup in case it was needed.

At length Lahan said, "You don't think it might belong to a dove?"

"How prosaic."

Many people ate dove meat, and there was a custom of releasing the birds on celebratory occasions. Lahan looked a bit deflated; maybe he'd been hoping for something a little more exotic.

Maomao stared out the window. "They said we'd be taking a boat home, right?"

"That's right," Lahan replied. Beside him, Rikuson was smiling broadly. Not obliged to attend either the wedding or the funeral, *he* at least had been able to tour around a little, and he gave Maomao a piece of silk cloth he'd gotten. She was happy enough to take whatever she was given, but something about it all felt a bit unfair to her, and she couldn't help giving him a modestly dirty look.

"Why couldn't you have attended instead?" she muttered.

"Oh, I would never have fit in at that household," he said. It sounded humble, at least, and he was smiling, but she had no idea whether he was telling the whole truth.

Ah-Duo and Consort Lishu were riding in a separate carriage and would make the journey home together. Certainly, there was no sense in them staying in the western capital any longer. Lishu's father Uryuu had apparently said he would bring Lishu home, but Ah-Duo had turned him down. To suddenly develop a soft spot for the daughter he'd ignored for the last fifteen years was, well, convenient to say the least.

"We'll have to change vessels a few times, but we should make it back in half the time it took to get here. And the wind should be with us at this time of year," Lahan said.

Ships had an advantage over carriages in that they didn't have to stop frequently to rest. Going west, however, they would have been traveling upriver and with the wind against them, a time-consuming proposition. But now they would be traveling down one of the tributaries of the Great River, and a boat would easily get them to the capital.

Jinshi and Basen, meanwhile, were still in the western capital; they had been unavoidably detained to conclude the business they

had put off. By all rights, Maomao should have stayed with them, but Lahan had apparently asked Jinshi: “Might I borrow my little sister for a while?”

If she’d been present, she might have objected: “I’m not your sister” or “Don’t drag me into your twisted plans,” but she hadn’t been there, and the matter had been decided without her input. From what she heard, Jinshi had been about to refuse, but then had changed his mind and agreed.

She hadn’t had a proper opportunity to talk to him since the night of the banquet. Maomao admittedly felt awkward around him and, in her own way, was glad to be rescued from the situation.

As happy as I am to be going home early... She was also anxious. She mulled over whether she should go sleep with Ah-Duo rather than anywhere near Lahan as she packed her clothing into a wrapping to make a pillow. After all that work she’d done to make a cozy sleeping place in the carriage, now she had to start all over again.

“How about some modesty, little sister?” Lahan said.

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Lahan and Rikuson exchanged a look, but Maomao didn’t care. She closed her eyes and went to sleep.

After two days in the carriage they arrived at the landing, where Maomao’s slightly bad feeling became a *very* bad feeling. The river was narrow going upstream, and the vessel awaiting them was less of a ship and more of a dinghy. They couldn’t even fit everything on one boat; there was a second one floating there to hold their luggage.

“Are we sure about this?” she asked.

“I trust the business,” Lahan replied. “I don’t expect any trouble with theft.”

“Not what I was asking.”

“I know. Don’t say it.” He wouldn’t quite look at her. Evidently he’d been picturing a bigger boat too.

“Ah ha ha ha ha! This is fun!” The exclamation came from Ah-Duo, the only cheerful member of their party; the rest of them were too busy clinging to the dinghy to squeal or shout. The captain assured them that the rapids only covered the first *li* or so, but there seemed to be every chance they would capsize before they got that

far.

Lishu was resting her head on Ah-Duo's knees. The relentless rolling and rocking of the boat during the first moments of the trip had been enough to make the timid young woman faint clean away. She was secured with a rope to keep her from falling overboard. But really, maybe she was the lucky one.

"I d-didn't think...it would sh-shake so much..." the tousled-haired man with the glasses said, his face pale as he deposited bile into the frothing water. And here he'd been gloating about how this would be the fastest way home. Apparently he'd quite forgotten about the differences between traveling by land and traveling by ship.

"Don't turn this way. You'll spit that stuff on me."

"Maomao, give me something to settle my stomach..." He reached toward her with a shivering hand, but she wasn't sure what to do. She'd already given him an antiemetic—and he'd promptly thrown it up. She could give him another, but he would only vomit that out too.

Rikuson wasn't as boisterous as Ah-Duo, but he seemed just as relaxed. He was watching the local fauna with a big smile on his face. "Look over there, Sir Lahan; you can see a little bird. Ah, I never get tired of the scenery here. It's always so lovely."

That's just another way of saying the scenery never changes, Maomao thought.

Suirei looked a little bit ill, but she wasn't setting up the racket that Lahan was. Not all of the bodyguards looked entirely comfortable either, but they weren't going to allow themselves to act pathetic while they were on the job.

Maomao was Maomao: a bottle of wine wouldn't leave her tipsy, and neither could a moving vehicle. Still, she wasn't a confident swimmer, so she sat quietly in the interests of not falling overboard.

"Look at all of you..." Lahan grumbled. Seeing him so out of sorts was, in its own way, a rare treat, and Maomao found herself quite amused.

Once the tributary joined the main river, the stream grew wider, and they changed to their next boat.

"Are you sure you don't have anything to stop me feeling so sick?" Lahan asked. He was clinging to a bucket, his face bloodless.

It seemed he wasn't feeling much better despite the larger vessel, although he was actively throwing up less often. So there was that.

They were in a small cabin, of which the ship had just two; this room was for the women of the party. They couldn't, after all, have Ah-Duo or Consort Lishu sleeping side by side with everybody else. If Lahan had shown his face there, especially looking so bedraggled, it had to be a sign that he couldn't take the seasickness anymore.

Lishu had eventually come to, but she was still resting on Ah-Duo's lap. It was plain to see that she was pretending to be seasick in the name of a bit of coddling.

"The stuff you threw up earlier was all I had left," Maomao said. She'd finally given him the medicine, but it had come right back up. It hadn't even had time to take effect. She'd brought the antiemetics because she knew how shaky a carriage could be; she'd never expected to need them for this.

Ships indeed had the advantage of not having to stop, meaning you got to your destination sooner—but it also meant the shaking never ceased. Maomao was a little surprised to realize that Lahan was so sensitive to the boat when he hadn't had a problem with the carriage.

I mean, it's not like I don't understand. Maomao leaned along with a roll of the ship, but Lahan exclaimed "Yikes!" and grabbed on to a post, his other hand still clutching his bucket.

Next, Maomao leaned in the other direction.

"Why don't *you* get seasick?" Lahan asked resentfully.

"Maybe it's the same reason I don't get drunk very easily."

Incidentally, Lahan was not a man who could hold his liquor. He continued to glare at Maomao, who hadn't so much as turned green.

"I'm not riding on any more boats!" he announced, looking haggard—but the middle of a river journey was hardly the ideal place to find a good carriage, and he ended up getting on the next ship as well. Besides, he had to accompany Ah-Duo and the consort back home. Ah-Duo seemed quite enamored of traveling by ship, while Lishu was quite enamored of being doted on by Ah-Duo. Neither of them could think of any compelling reason to switch to a carriage now.

By and by they arrived at the third boat landing. As Maomao was disembarking to switch to the next ship, she heard a loud thump. What could it be?

As it happened, it was someone collapsing right there on the dock. A sailor was trying to bring him around, although he looked cautious as he did so. The limp figure was a man in a thoroughly weathered cloak.

Is he sick? Maomao wondered, observing from a safe distance. She didn't want to get sucked into anything, but she wasn't so cold-blooded that she would leave a sick or injured person without help.

"Hey, mister, you all right?" the sailor said, giving the man a shake.

"I'm... I'm juuust fine," the man said, although he sounded pretty out of it.

The sailor got him face up, but then groaned. "Urgh..."

The man must have been quite handsome once; the high, firm bridge of his nose and his willow-branch eyebrows proved it. But half his face was covered in pockmarks; if his face had been a circle, the pockmarked skin and the clear skin would have roughly formed a yin-yang shape.

The sailor shoved the man away. The newcomer got unsteadily to his feet. "Excuse me, sir. Could I hitch a ride on your boat?" There was a smile on his hideous face, and Maomao could see a pouch of small coins in his outstretched hand. He was still young—maybe in his midtwenties.

"H-Hold on, you! You don't have some weird sickness, do you?" cried the sailor who'd helped him up, brushing furiously at anything that had come into contact with the man.

Still smiling, the man touched his ravaged face. "Oops!" He nodded to himself as if it all made sense. A scarf lay on the ground at his feet; it must have fallen off when he collapsed. He picked it up and folded it in half, forming it into a triangle; he then used it to cover half his face. At a glance, it almost looked like a bandage.

"I know! It's smallpox! That's what that is, isn't it?!"

Smallpox was a terrible disease that covered the entire body in pustules. It was an extremely infectious illness that, it was said, could devastate an entire nation. Even the cough or sneeze of a sick person could be enough to pass it to someone else.

The man gave a dumb smile and scratched his cheek. "Hah, it's okay! These are just scars. I did have smallpox once, but now I'm fit as a fiddle! Just look!"

"Like hell! You collapsed not five minutes ago! Stay back—back, I say!"

“I only collapsed because I got a little hungry! You’ve got to believe me!”

The conversation inspired everyone else near the man to give him a little extra room. Maomao narrowed her eyes. If he wasn’t sick, then she wasn’t needed here.

“What seems to be the matter?” asked Rikuson, who had been transferring their luggage to the next boat. He seemed very fastidious. Maomao privately decided to dub him “Gaoshun 2.”

“That man with the bandage on his face wants to board the ship, but the sailor won’t let him,” she explained briefly.

“Hmm,” said Rikuson, studying the young man. With his pockmarks covered, he really was downright handsome. And he sounded rather lighthearted. “What’s the problem? Is he trying to freeload?”

“No, he has the money, but he’s got pockmarks on his face, and the sailor’s worried he might be sick. But it’s a moot point, since the ship is full anyway.”

Consort Lishu was on board, which meant there would be bodyguards. They couldn’t have some random stranger getting on board too.

Rikuson squinted at the man. “Is he really sick?”

“Good question.” From this distance, it was hard to be sure, but from what Maomao could see, the man had pockmarks but no pustules. He was probably telling the truth—he’d been sick once, but it had been a long time ago. So why didn’t Maomao simply say that to the sailor?

Because it’s only going to be a headache for me getting involved.

It was just that simple.

The young man showed no sign of giving up on the boat, though; he practically clung to the sailor. “I’m begging you, let me on board! How can you be so cruel?”

“Leggo of me! Stop! I’ll catch your pox!”

Usually, handsome men with scars on their faces had a dark mood to match, but evidently not this guy. He clung to the sailor’s bulky feet and wouldn’t let go. The other sailors wished they could help their shipmate, but, frightened of possibly catching some awful disease, they stood helplessly at a distance.

Something had to be done about this man or the ship was never going to leave.

Rikuson must have guessed what Maomao was thinking from

her expression, because he grinned. “I wish the ship would hurry up and go, don’t you?”

She didn’t say anything. What, was he trying to tell her to do something about it?

Looking thoroughly put-upon, Maomao got off the boat and went over to the sailor (who by now looked deeply troubled) and the young man (who by now had snot coming out of his nose).

“Pardon me,” she said.

“Yes?” the young man replied. It wasn’t exactly consent, but she grabbed the scarf off Snot Man’s face anyway. One look at the ugly marks was enough for her to confirm that he’d gotten them years ago. She looked at the eye on the pockmarked side of his face; it appeared hazy and unfocused. His pupils were different sizes as well; chances were he was blind in the one.

“This person is not sick,” she announced. “He has scars, but there’s no chance of him spreading the disease to anybody else.” Not smallpox, anyway. As to any other diseases he might have, she didn’t know and disclaimed all responsibility.

With a look of total revulsion, the sailor gingerly picked up the coin purse the man had dropped. He turned it upside down, small change tumbling musically out of it. “And where are you going, sir?”

“To the capital! I want to go to the capital! *The capital!*” He clenched his hands into fists and shook them with excitement; he couldn’t have seemed more like a country bumpkin headed for the big city if he’d tried. “And once I’m there, I’m gonna make *so many* medicines!”

“Medicines?” Maomao’s ears perked up.

“Yeah! I may not look like much, but I’m kind of a big deal!” The man pulled a large bag from somewhere under his cape, and when he opened it, a distinctive odor wafted out. Maomao took the clay pot from the bag and opened the lid to find it was full of ointment. She had no idea if it was effective, but it had been made very scrupulously, with thoroughly powdered medicinal herbs blended to the perfect consistency. Such care in preparation was even more vital to the quality of the final product than exactly which herbs were used.

Maomao looked at the man afresh. He was grinning widely and said to the sailor, “Want some? Works on seasickness!” But of course, no sailor was going to buy a medicine like that.

“Pff, tightwad. Why not just buy some? Oh! Actually, forget about buying anything. Can I get on the boat? Yes? The boat?”

“No. This ship is rented out. You’ll have to wait for the next one.”

“What? Seriously? I have to wait?!” The man looked less than thrilled, but seemed to accept it. Then he looked at Maomao and grinned again. “Thanks, you were a big help. To show my gratitude, let me give you some of this seasickness medicine!”

The way he talked made him sound very, well, *young*, but he seemed to be more grown-up than he acted. He at least appeared to be older than Maomao.

“No, thanks. I don’t get seasick,” Maomao said.

“No? Shame, that.”

The man was just about to put the medicine away when from behind Maomao someone bellowed, “*Hold it!*” Lahan came veritably flying off the ship. “The m-medicine... G-Give it to me...” he said, breathing hard.

I’m impressed he was able to hear us, Maomao thought. He’d been quite a ways away, and not looking his best. Maomao entertained herself with such thoughts as she got on the boat.

“Phew, you really saved my neck! Not only did you explain about my illness, you even got me onto this boat!”

The man with the bandage turned out to be named Kokuyou. He was a traveler, as Maomao might have guessed from his grimy apparel. He was also a doctor, or at least so he claimed.

When Lahan heard that Kokuyou had all kinds of medicine with him, he became quite insistent that the traveler should join them on their ship. And since it was Lahan who had made the travel arrangements to begin with, that was his prerogative, so long as the newcomer didn’t seem likely to do any harm to Consort Lishu or anyone else. However, Kokuyou wasn’t guaranteed to get to the capital, but rather only to the next landing, where Lahan would be getting off.

Kokuyou was a bit of an odd character, and quite a talker too; he jabbered on about himself as he mixed up some medicine.

“Hrm. Long story short, they drove me out. ‘You’re cursed! Get out of here! Grah!’ How cruel, am I right?” Kokuyou said, although he certainly didn’t sound like he thought it was. There was no grim edge to his tone; he chatted away like an old lady gossiping at the

village well.

Maomao watched him closely, understandably doubtful about whether a medicine concocted by a smallpox-stricken man of uncertain origin would really work. His antiemetic didn't seem to have anything special in it either. Lahan, in much better spirits, had called Kokuyou to his personal cabin, and Maomao had come along, thinking that, since he claimed to be a doctor, it might be worth hearing what Kokuyou had to say.

"I've actually been in the same place for the past several years. Last year, the village suffered from a plague of insects. Then, out of the blue, the village shaman started saying it was a curse!"

And that, Kokuyou claimed, was when he found himself chased out. Doctors and shamans tended not to get along very well. In Maomao's opinion, it was stupid and ridiculous to believe in baseless ideas like curses, but she was in the minority on that. Frankly, it made her angry.

Notwithstanding Kokuyou's frivolous tone, his medicine proved quite effective. Lahan, who until that point hadn't been separated from his bucket for a moment, was able to join the conversation. It might have helped that the ship no longer rolled quite as violently as it had before, but in any case Lahan appeared very satisfied.

"Hmm. So you say you're going to the capital in search of work?" he asked.

"Yes, well... Yes. I suppose that's about the size of it."

Lahan *hmm*ed again and stroked his chin. He appeared to be calculating something—but Maomao jabbed him with her elbow.

Don't drag us into anything...weird.

The man might seem a little odd, but if his medical chops were for real, then he would be able to make a living in the capital. *If*, that was, he hid his smallpox scars.

Insofar as they were still traveling with Ah-Duo and Consort Lishu, it wasn't ideal to have a strange man with them. Lahan knew that: he looked at Maomao and took a piece of paper from the folds of his robes. He dashed off a quick note and said, "If you ever need anything, come to this address. I might be able to lend you some help." Lahan had written down the address of his house in the capital.

Kokuyou took the paper and gave them a guileless smile. "Ha ha! Wow, I sure bumped into some nice people!"

He's not doing it out of the goodness of his heart, Maomao warned

privately. Lahan was the scheming type. He'd only given Kokuyou his address because he'd thought there was some way he might be able to use the man.

"Incidentally, if I may ask, what happened with the plague of insects last year?" Maomao said. She would have loved to interrogate Kokuyou and find out how far his medical knowledge went, but this question took priority.

"Mm! It wasn't bad enough for them to eat through tree roots or make money so tight that people couldn't feed their children. The little kids did get weak from malnutrition, but it didn't get any worse than that." Kokuyou looked suitably sad as he made his report. Malnutrition made one more susceptible to illness—and who treated illness? Doctors. Maomao wondered about the current state of the village that had chased him out.

"If they had a fairly abundant harvest this year, I think they should be fine," Kokuyou said. Maomao didn't think that was very likely, and the man evidently agreed with her, for he said, "I hope the villagers can keep helpin' each other out until they get one..."

It was such a nice thought, "helping each other." But there were always *if*s involved. You could help your neighbor *if* you had the resources to spare. *If* you had enough to eat, then you could give someone else some of the extra. That was what "helping" usually meant; supporting someone else while you yourself starved was pointless. Yes, there were some idiots out there who would share everything they had at their own expense—but most of them were holy men and women in stories.

If people were going to treat doctors and apothecaries as if they were sages like those, they should make their physicians' lives nice enough to put them in the mood. One's basic needs had to be met before one could practice medicine. What would be the point if, leading a deprived life, the doctor got sick themselves?

The village that had chased this man out might be finding themselves wanting a physician right about now, but it would be a little late. Spilled water didn't go back to the cup.

"All right, be seeing you, then!" Kokuyou delicately folded the piece of paper with the address on it and put it into his own robes. They'd paid his way only as far as he would be sailing with them. He would have a place in the bodyguards' cabin—it doubled as a way of keeping an eye on him.

Now that I think about it...

Kokuyou's mention of insect plague reminded her: one of the accumulated problems was the one Lahan had taken on.

"What are you planning to do about the plague of insects? I mean, the stuff the golden-haired lady was talking to you about?" Maomao asked, referring to something the emissary had said during the banquet at the western capital. She wanted grain exports to Shaoh, and if that wasn't possible, then she had requested political asylum. "What benefit does it hold for us?"

The export idea was very risky, and the asylum idea was downright dangerous.

Maomao and Lahan were the only ones in the room; that was why they could have this conversation. Even Rikuson hadn't heard about this.

"What do you think? That she had me wrapped around her little finger? That I would do whatever she asked, without thinking about it, just because she was pretty?"

"Wouldn't you?" She was joking, sort of; this was, after all, the guy who wouldn't shut up about Jinshi's looks. (Lahan was obviously unaware that Jinshi had something of a complex about his own appearance.)

"I have a few ideas of my own."

"Like what?"

"Our little sailing adventure is going to be over when we reach the next landing. I assume you don't mind me splitting off from Lady Ah-Duo and the others?"

Maybe Lahan was finally tired of being seasick—or maybe this was why he'd brought Maomao all along.

"I'll continue to accompany them, then."

"Now, slow down," Lahan said, waving a hand to keep her from going any further. "I guarantee you'll be very interested in where I'm going."

"How so?"

Lahan produced an abacus and started flicking the beads along it. "Well, we might turn out to be counting our chickens before they hatch." But, he seemed to be saying, it was worth a shot.

Then, however, he said: "We're going to go see my dad."

So that was what Lahan called him. Not something respectful like "Father." Just "Dad."

Chapter 5: Wrapping Up in the Western Capital

“Shall I take that to mean I should come to the capital sometime?” Gyokuen asked.

“Yes, that would be correct,” Jinshi responded.

They were in Gyokuen’s annex, a pleasant, cool place facing a pond. It was just the two of them; Basen and their various bodyguards were outside. Neither man had anything resembling a weapon—this was their chance to talk to each other in complete and full confidence.

Jinshi reflected on how difficult this was as he picked his words. He was the Emperor’s younger brother, and though Gyokuen might be the Empress’s father, Jinshi still outranked him. The problem was, he constantly felt like he was about to slip back into the more deferential tone of a eunuch.

Everyone else had gone, leaving Jinshi and Basen in the western capital, where Jinshi proceeded to take care of one thing and then another; diligent, methodical.

“Yes, it’s just as you imagine. Especially considering the accession of Empress Gyokuyou, the feeling is that it would be best if you had a name as soon as possible.”

The consort had become Empress, but her official presentation had been delayed on two grounds: one, that Empress Gyokuyou had thick western blood; and two, that Gyokuen still lacked a family name. There wasn’t much to be done about the former, but as to the latter, the obvious solution was simply to hurry up and give him one. The subject ought to have been addressed sooner, but with so many guests, it ended up being put off until after everyone had gone home.

Gyokuen had probably known this was coming. The idea had been in the air, and the more perceptive might have guessed Jinshi would do something like this. Jinshi had wondered if Uryuu might try to object, but the incident with his own daughter had left him

without a leg to stand on. Lishu might have been a family member, but she was also the Emperor's consort, and acting maliciously toward her would be neither permitted nor forgiven. Worse was his transparent attempt to destroy the evidence. And this when Consort Lishu's ladies-in-waiting at the rear palace still played pranks on her on a regular basis. And to top it all off, Uryuu himself seemed far more partial to Lishu's older sister.

Normally, this would have brought punishment down upon their heads, but Consort Lishu hadn't wanted that. So instead, the matter was dropped—and the U clan was left owing a favor.

Gyokuen looked briefly thrilled to know he would be granted a name, but then his eyebrows drooped. Jinshi couldn't be sure whether it was an act or a genuine reaction, but either way it meant he wasn't going to simply accept the offer wholeheartedly.

Jinshi understood perfectly well why that was, but he pretended not to. "Is something the matter?" he asked.

"No, it's simply... Again, this means I would have to go to the capital, does it not?"

"Yes, it does."

Even the most urgent trip from the western reaches to the capital and back would take at least a month, a difficult prospect for Gyokuen, who was supposed to be governing this area. Yet he also understood that he didn't have the option of turning this offer down.

Gyokuen had a son, a man substantially older than Empress Gyokuyou by another woman. Although unlike the U children, Gyokuyou and her brother seemed to get along.

"I do have a son, and if all seems quiet, he shouldn't have any trouble here in my stead..."

Yes, if all seemed quiet. There was the rub.

It was very clear why Gyokuyou had been made Empress: the Emperor wished to focus on what was happening in the west. Beyond the western capital was the land of Shaoh.

Shaoh was not such an issue in and of itself; the real problem was the country that stretched above it: Hokuaren. The Emperor would bind himself to Gyokuen's clan in order to strengthen the western border, but if anything were to happen while the clan leader was away—well, the prospect was frightening. Neither could Gyokuen's son travel to the capital in his father's place; it was expected to be the head of the clan who appeared to receive the

name.

Some argued for ignoring such moldy old customs, but it was Empress Gyokuyou who was likely to suffer if her father chose to break with precedent.

Gyokuen was and had always been a functionary from the western capital. He held a fair amount of territory, to be sure, but in the eyes of many officials in the royal capital, he still occupied a provincial post on the fringes of the country, no matter how much land it might come with. His swift rise to prominence after the destruction of the Yi clan couldn't be denied, but it was also the source of much resentment and resistance against him.

"I'm very sorry, but I must ask that you come regardless," Jinshi said. He did feel for the man, but it was the only way. Jinshi, as well as the Emperor, knew they were asking something almost impossible of Gyokuen, but the demand didn't come from them. It came from the high officials in the capital. Perhaps including several with relatives in the rear palace.

"This is only the first part of their plan to punish an upstart rube, I suppose," Gyokuen said, yet he looked more or less relaxed. Perhaps if you couldn't handle needling of this kind, you simply didn't have the disposition for politics. The word "upstart" might be taken to imply a weak position, but that didn't seem to be true of Gyokuen. "In any case, I understand," he said.

He'd known he'd get this answer eventually, but actually hearing the words gave Jinshi a rush of relief. However, Gyokuen wasn't finished.

"If I may, though, I'd like to stipulate a condition."

"A condition?"

"Yes. I'd like my son to have someone to help him. He's known only the western lands his whole life, and has little experience of the world. If possible, I'd like him to be attended by someone with knowledge of the central region."

In other words: *I'm going to do this impossible thing you ask, so give me some decent personnel in exchange.*

"Hmm. Yes, that seems reasonable. Did you have anyone particular in mind?"

It was, in fact, an understandable request. Gyokuen's son would one day succeed him, and he would need to know about life in the region around the capital, even if his knowledge thereof was only minimal.

“Yes. During the banquet, young Basen seemed like an entirely different person when he threw himself in front of that lion.”

“Ah, him? He’s...”

If Gyokuen had his eye on Basen, that could be a problem. He might not look like much, but he was very important to Jinshi, someone who could speak frankly to him and around whom Jinshi could relax.

“Please don’t misunderstand me; that’s not what I’m asking. I would never seek something so far beyond my station as to have a member of the Ma clan attend upon my son,” Gyokuen said quickly, grasping the import of Jinshi’s reaction.

The Ma were one of the named clans, and yet they never became ministers or occupied other high offices. Instead, they existed to serve the Imperial family. The matter might have been open had Basen come from a family with no name, but as a member of the Ma clan, he was assured that he would somehow be involved with the Imperial family—and not with anyone else. Gyokuen was quick to deny that he was asking for a member of Basen’s clan to help him, because to do so would have been to claim that his family was coequal with the Emperor’s—a claim that would have bordered on treasonous.

“I was merely impressed,” Gyokuen continued. “I don’t know how many men there are who could act so decisively when confronted with a wild animal instead of trembling in terror.”

Gyokuen’s remark was simple, earnest praise, it appeared. It felt somewhat strange to hear someone laud Basen so unreservedly, but Jinshi agreed with him: for as easily as he got out of sorts under most circumstances, when push came to shove Basen showed remarkable composure. He’d acted quickly, as well. The more dangerous a situation, the more one acted not on thought but on instinct, and Basen’s instincts had not steered him wrong. He deserved a good word.

Truth be told, in martial training, Jinshi and Basen were roughly on equal footing. Jinshi had more refined technique, so in formal contests he was often the victor. If they were ever in an actual fight, though, he had no confidence he could best Basen. This also explained why Gaoshun had assigned Basen to Jinshi despite his inexperience.

“It would certainly put a person’s mind at ease to have someone so capable guarding them.” Gyokuen, who wasn’t privy to Basen’s

idiosyncrasies, was full of praise.

"Oh? I'll have to be sure to let Basen know," was all Jinshi said, and then he began thinking about possible candidates. If Gyokuen had come to him personally, he must have at least had someone in mind. "Now then, what sort of person were you hoping to have attend your son?"

Openly and directly, that was the way to handle this situation. Gyokuen nodded slowly. "I was hoping I might ask for someone in the capital."

"Hoh. And who might that be?"

Did Gyokuen have some acquaintance in the capital city, or had Empress Gyokuyou put in a good word for somebody? The Empress was a sharp-eyed woman, and it wouldn't have surprised Jinshi if she'd found some good help and was trying to send them back to her home.

Gyokuen smiled—and then said something unbelievable. "Perhaps you could prevail upon Sir Lakan in this matter?"

It was all Jinshi could do to keep the dismay off his face.

After he parted ways with Gyokuen, Jinshi returned to his guest room and slumped on the couch. "That should be the last of it," he said.

"Yes, sir."

If Gaoshun had been there, Jinshi might have taken the opportunity to get a wide variety of complaints off his chest, but no; only Basen was present. He, too, seemed on edge, sighing audibly.

The capital could be suffocating in its own way, but it was better than being stuck here. Jinshi at least felt a little easier having sent Consort Lishu and the others on ahead. His one miscalculation had been allowing the apothecary girl to be taken away just because *someone* had played the "older brother" card.

Admittedly, her absence was a relief in one way, but at the same time, it unsettled him. Yet he could practically see what the girl, almost a full *shaku* shorter than him, would do to him if he hurried now. He would have to make the most of this situation.

"Would you like some fruit juice, sir?" Basen asked.

"Yes, thank you."

Basen falteringly got the juice ready. While Jinshi was away, servants came in to make the bed and take care of other sundry tasks, but when he was in the room, Jinshi preferred servants not to

enter unless absolutely necessary. It wasn't that he didn't trust the staff of Gyokuen's house; he'd simply had enough unpleasant experiences in the past that he preferred to avoid the presence of servants. Perhaps Gyokuen had found this out via Empress Gyokuyou, for no member of the household staff appeared at Jinshi's door unless he summoned them.

As far as testing his food for poison, the bodyguard outside would take a mouthful, and Basen would have another. It was largely for form's sake; against a slow-acting poison, the exercise would be pointless. As far as that went, he would just have to trust Gyokuen.

Jinshi let the sour juice sit on his tongue as he vacantly contemplated the next day. He would finally be able to return to the capital, and going back should be a much quicker trip than coming out here had been. Jinshi personally preferred traveling by land to going by ship, but if it could save that much time, then by ship it was.

He *did* want to hurry and get home, but people here kept drawing things out with him, hoping to get his attention. His return date had slipped in part because of the commotion at the banquet and later the matter of the funeral, but there was also just plain old politicking involved. Perhaps that was part of why Gyokuen had left his own business until now: in the western capital, his name made it easy to get away. One need only say, "I'm afraid I have a meeting with Gyokuen after this."

Nonetheless, there was no end of people who brought their daughters or younger sisters to pour drinks for him, or who came accompanied by foreign-looking women oozing exotic beauty. Some of their perfumes must have contained aphrodisiac ingredients, because Basen, who was particularly sensitive to such things, didn't touch his drink; he simply sat there, red all over. He was convenient, in a way, as a sort of litmus test.

Even though Basen was Jinshi's milk brother and an old friend, there were still some criticisms of him Jinshi could have offered. The other day—during the incident that had invited such a terrific misunderstanding on Ah-Duo's part—Jinshi had thought that perhaps Basen had finally grown up a little, but he seemed to have been wrong about that. The young man remained a late bloomer when it came to women his own age. Only with Maomao did he seem completely at ease, and in a way, that might only have been a

sign that he couldn't imagine himself breaking her.

Jinshi himself felt that, notwithstanding her imperviousness to poisons, she was still a small and delicate-looking girl who seemed as fragile as the next young woman—but strangely, he found he couldn't imagine her breaking like that. Maybe because he'd seen her laugh uproariously as she took poison, or come back from being kidnapped looking as calm as if she'd been away running errands, and on and on.

Simple enough: Basen didn't see the apothecary girl as a woman. But Jinshi was conflicted. By Basen's age, his father Gaoshun had already had three children. To think that a man so clearly, ahem, active among women should have a son like this... And Basen's older sister and older brother were already married.

Jinshi drained his cup and looked at Basen. "Aren't you being pestered about getting married yet?"

Basen frowned, caught off guard by Jinshi's question. It was plain to see. Basen's mother had been Jinshi's nursemaid, so he was well acquainted with the type of person she was—a woman forceful enough that Gaoshun sometimes described his own wife as a scary lady.

Basen paled and began sweating profusely, even trembling. Jinshi seemed to have provoked some bad memories.

"I've been, w-well, *encouraged* to go to some arranged meetings."

"With upstanding young ladies, I'm sure," Jinshi said. His expression didn't change, but inwardly he grinned. The questions had all been coming *his* way lately; it was fun to be on the giving end for once. "You were at least shown portraits of them?"

"Yes... I was willing to look, if nothing more," Basen said.

Perhaps that was wise. A picture could easily "improve" upon reality. One could very well be talked into a meeting on false pretenses, after which the other side might try to claim Basen was committed. And Basen, being who he was, was so hardheaded that once a "relationship" like that had been established, he would probably feel responsible to the woman for the rest of his life.

Basen's brow furrowed and he looked conflicted. He cast his eyes down and stared at his bandaged right hand. After a long moment he said, "I'm still so inexperienced. I think it may be a little...soon for me to be thinking about women."

It was a truly pathetic pronouncement, but as Jinshi watched

Basen, he regretted teasing his friend. “Is *that* still bothering you?” he asked.

Basen didn’t say anything.

Jinshi knew: Basen’s discomfort around women had something to do with his mother and his older sister. And, in a way, Jinshi as well.

Because Basen’s own mother had spent all her time tending Jinshi, Basen had been looked after by his sister, two years older than him, and a serving woman. It’s practically a child’s job to beg and plead and indulge his own desires, but things were a little different with Basen.

Sometimes a warrior in battle would transcend mere training: in a moment of crisis, his enemy’s movements might appear slow, or he might seem immune to pain. Typically, such powers were gained from endless honing of himself as a warrior, but Basen seemed to have been born with them. Was it just coincidence, or did it come of being the son of a household with a military tradition stretching back centuries? Whichever, Basen’s abilities could only be called something instinctive.

Once, when Basen had been set on seeing his mother, those abilities had been turned upon his sister and the serving woman. Usually, they were able to talk him down from his tantrums, but not that time. With his child’s hand, small and red like a maple leaf, Basen had grabbed his sister’s arm—and broken it.

He had been just six at the time, and he broke one of his own fingers in the act. He was so strong, the kickback from his own action had been just that powerful.

On account of that incident, Basen began to live separately from his older sister and brother. Jinshi first met him shortly after that, and initially considered him a rather cold and distant person—but of course he was; Jinshi had all but stolen his mother from him. That they were then to be instructed in swordsmanship together was partly to foster closeness between them, and partly an act of mercy toward Basen.

Jinshi first heard this story when he was more than ten years old, after Gaoshun had seen him teasing Basen for trying to keep his distance from the ladies-in-waiting.

“Women are such fragile creatures,” Basen said. “I think it’s too soon for me.”

What could Jinshi say to that? There was nothing. Instead, he

held out his cup, silently asking for more juice.

Chapter 6: The La Clan (Part One)

Are we sure about this? Maomao thought as she sipped her tea. Familiarity could be a dangerous thing—it blunted your sense of danger.

"I suppose this counts as a warm welcome," Lahan said, likewise sipping some tea.

A stony-faced man sat across the table from them, arms folded.

"Now, my dear brother..." Lahan said. If he was to be taken at his word, the man facing them was his older brother. He was of medium build, not too tall, his features more or less undistinguished, and that seemed to be all there was to him. Come to think of it, Lahan had said the eccentric strategist had adopted him, but he never said he didn't have other siblings. Maomao had simply assumed.

Lahan had brought them to an estate not far from the boat landing—close enough to walk. Rikuson had gotten off the boat with them, but Lahan had given him an "I'm not so sure about bringing strangers along," and he was now at an inn near the landing. Maomao thought he could just as well have continued home with Ah-Duo and Consort Lishu, but apparently that wasn't in the cards.

As for the endlessly cheerful Kokuyou, he'd said he was going to find a carriage to take him to the capital. If fate decreed, they would meet again.

The house to which they had been going wasn't in a town; it was plopped down somewhere off by itself. A reasonably sumptuous house it was, but it was just sitting out here in the countryside. Maybe some high official from the capital had been banished out here; it would have been humiliating for someone like that.

Is it really all right for us to just drop in somewhere like this?

Maomao could see what appeared to be crop fields all around. Small houses dotted the landscape in the distance beyond them, but they were too far apart to constitute a village. The crop growing in the fields was something Maomao didn't see much of. It looked

similar to bindweed, but bindweed was considered, well, a weed, because it rarely produced fruit. But this, whatever it was, had been planted over a large area.

Wonder what it could be.

Just as they were on their way to the house, they'd passed this man on the road. He'd given them a stricken look, then dragged them to a nearby shed, which was where they were now. As for the tea, the kettle had been right there, and they'd simply borrowed it. It hadn't smelled funny, so it was probably safe. The tea tasted unusual, though, most likely something roasted. The place appeared to be a small workshop serving the fieldwork; the neatly arranged farm implements spoke to the owner's meticulousness.

"Why are you here?!" the man demanded.

"Why? What, can't your little brother come for a visit?" (It was Maomao's suspicion that they were really here because Lahan had smelled money.) "Is Dad around? I'd like to talk to him."

"Dad! You mean your fox-eyed 'father'?"

"No, I mean *Dad*. My honored adoptive father is in the capital, for your information."

Lahan's brother fell silent—until he smacked the door with abandon. "Get out of here and go home! Now, before they find you!"

"You're terrible. It's been ages since you saw your little brother."

"You're not my father's son anymore."

The conversation sounded vaguely absurd. Maomao opened the lid of the teapot and looked inside to find not tea leaves, but roasted barley. Yes, she thought, impressed; that was one way to use it.

So Lahan nonchalantly sipped his drink while his brother raged and ordered him to go home. Maomao, meanwhile, inspected a vine lying in a corner of the small building. It appeared to be the same thing that was planted in the fields outside. The vine had been clipped off and put in a bucket. A good, hard look revealed what appeared to be roots—so they were planning to replant it?

The leaves really did resemble bindweed, but apparently it was something else. Maomao started going through the shelves. Something about the fields had her attention and wouldn't let go. On the shelves she found nothing but buckets and rags, so she looked outside through the window. Although the little shed cast a

shadow in that direction, she saw pots with young morning glories in them.

But it's not a morning glory either.

There were lots of morning glories out behind the shed. Were they purely ornamental? Or perhaps the family made medicine from them? Morning glory seeds were known as *qianniuzi*, and were used as a laxative and diuretic. They could be quite toxic, though, and had to be dealt with carefully.

When Lahan's brother saw Maomao peering out the window, he slammed it shut. "What are you doing?!"

"Nothing. Just curious about the morning glories."

"Who the hell are you, anyway?"

A little late for that question.

"She's my younger sister, dear brother."

"I'm a complete stranger, sir."

"Which is it?!" Lahan's brother clenched his fists.

Maomao and Lahan looked at each other, then Maomao said, "He certainly is easy to get a rise out of."

"Right? They don't make many like him—he'll actually throw out a comeback when you want one."

"Stop it! I don't understand a word either of you is saying!" Lahan's brother stamped his feet. It really was fun to tweak him.

Lahan poured more tea from the teapot and offered it to the other man, who drank it down in a single gulp, then flung the cup away—the drink must have been really hot. Maomao went and retrieved the wooden drinking vessel.

"Excellent reaction. Inspiringly by the book," she said.

"Right? You'd think the likes of him would be everywhere, but they're surprisingly rare, his type."

"Godthammit, I don'th underthand one word!" the brother exclaimed, his tongue popping out of his mouth.

Okay, enough fun at Brother's expense. Time to get back to the subject.

"You seem to be intent on chasing us out. Might I ask why?" Maomao said. "I mean, I understand how you might despise this man for betraying his real family and joining up with that awful fox strategist."

"You've got it all wrong, Little Sister."

"She's got it pretty much right, but that's not the point."

"Pretty much *right*, Brother?!" Lahan said, genuinely distressed.

Had he really not realized?

His brother ignored him, looking at Maomao instead. “He calls you his little sister. You’re Lakan’s girl, then?”

Maomao replied with a truly dire look. Brother shivered and shrank back.

“Maomao, don’t look at my dear brother that way; you’ll give him a heart attack. I said, don’t!” Lahan sounded like he was talking to a child, and that only annoyed her more. She looked away from both of them and took another drink of tea.

Lahan’s brother sat down, his face drawn, and took a few deep breaths to steady himself. He opened his mouth, but Maomao glared at him. He put a hand to his forehead and chose his words carefully. “Look, it doesn’t really matter who you are—you should get out of here, as fast as you can. And if you *are* who Lahan claims you are, all the more reason.”

“I take it from your tone that this is no small matter,” Lahan said.

“If you understand that, then stop quibbling and go.”

Being treated like that, though, could only pique a person’s curiosity. Lahan’s spectacles flashed. “Brother, what *has* happened?”

“It’s safest if you don’t ask.”

“We just want to know what’s going on. Then we’ll be good and go home.”

“If I tell you, there will be no escape.”

“Brother,” talk like that is going to have exactly the opposite of the effect you want, Maomao thought.

As the conversation went on, Lahan kept trying to wheedle out the information he wanted. Eventually, Maomao suspected, he would get the truth. Except that the plot twisted first.

The door opened with a clatter, revealing an elderly man with a cane, a middle-aged woman, and several of what appeared to be servants.

“I *thought* I heard a ruckus out here,” the woman said, narrowing her eyes at Maomao and Lahan. Lahan’s brother went pale. “It’s been a long time, Lahan. Three years, if my memory’s not failing me?”

“It has indeed been a long while.” Lahan stepped forward and bowed deeply. “Mother. Grandfather.”

Mother… Grandfather… Maomao thought. In other words, these were the family who had been chased out of the capital. The old

man was the picture of stubborn age, weathered around the eyes, his face set, his beard very long.

As for the woman, she had a lovely face, but her narrowed eyes made Maomao think of a predator. She looked like the woman from the Shi clan—Loulan's mother. In short, she was intimidating. Her outfit was a bit, well, loud, and she wore a white bracelet around her wrist—maybe she hadn't quite caught up with the current fashions yet.

"I see you've brought some scruffy little waif with you. Who's this, your maid?" the woman said. It seemed to be practically obligatory for new acquaintances to ridicule Maomao, and she was used to it by now. She stayed quiet and kept her eyes on the ground.

"Oh, heavens, Mother. This is my little sister."

"Laha—?!" Older Brother started to cry out, but slapped his hands over his mouth.

"Little sister... Lakan's daughter, are you?" the old man interjected. Maomao continued to look at the ground, but her face contorted into a scowl.

There was one person there who looked at least as offended by the name as Maomao did, and it was Lahan's mother. Maomao could even hear her grinding her teeth.

"Yes... Yes, that's right," Lahan volunteered. Even his brother had him fixed with a staggering glare. So this was why he'd been so intent on getting Lahan and Maomao out of there undiscovered. He hadn't wanted his mother or grandfather to find them. In that much, Maomao agreed with him: it looked like life would have been easier if they'd never met these people.

The old man made a muffled sound; it confused Maomao for a second before she realized it seemed to be laughter.

"Ha ha ha ha. How did you hear about it?"

Lahan looked perplexed. "How did we...?"

What's he talking about? Maomao wondered, wearing an expression of confusion similar to Lahan's. The others didn't seem to notice, perhaps because she and Lahan both had relatively minimal facial expressions.

Unconcerned, the old man continued: "If you're here about Lakan, forget it. He's an empty shell of a man. Didn't even resist when we put him in confinement. He just keeps muttering to himself. Frankly, it's unsettling."

“Wait... Confinement?” Maomao and Lahan looked at each other.

Lahan’s brother put a hand to his brow and let out a long sigh.

“Grandfather, what in the world are you talking about?” Lahan asked.

“Oh, don’t play dumb. Your foster father may be an eccentric, but even you would start to suspect something when he didn’t come back for ten whole days. That’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

Maomao didn’t understand exactly what was going on, but she understood that it sounded like a pain in the neck. And if this old man, Lahan’s grandfather, was to be believed, that freak was in confinement somewhere. Not that she *could* believe it.

“Erm, ten whole days doesn’t mean much to us, Grandfather. Maomao and I have both been away from the capital for more than a month now,” Lahan said, scratching the back of his neck.

The old man slowly turned to look at Maomao. “You’re kidding.”

Maomao brought out a small box from their luggage, which she opened to reveal a pot with a most unusual plant in it. It was the little cactus she’d received. “You won’t find these around here, at least not yet,” she said. They also had gooseberry jam and a few other things, but she figured a formless lump of food wouldn’t be as communicative. “We also have furs and silks,” she added.

Lahan’s mother and grandfather stared at the plant, the likes of which they’d never seen before. Yes, it was something that convincingly said “souvenir from the west.”

“You’re kidding,” Grandfather repeated.

“Why should we lie to you?” Lahan said. “We brought cigars too. Want some?” He, too, opened some of the luggage. Tobacco leaves were typically imported, and were quite a luxury item in the capital, but in the west, they could be had cheaply.

Mother and Grandfather looked at each other silently. At length, Grandfather swept one hand upward.

“Get ’em.”

The servants standing behind him advanced on Maomao and Lahan. They were shortly captured, still a little stupefied.

“How could this have happened? How could they lock me up? *Me!* I thought I was family.”

“I think you mean *a traitor*.”

“How rude!” Lahan said and sat down in a chair. They were indeed locked up, but in a fairly ordinary room. The furniture was old but sturdy, and the place was respectably clean. Maomao knew, because she’d run a finger along the shelves and windowsills looking for dust like a cruel mother-in-law, but hadn’t found any.

“Still...” Maomao said. There were a lot of mysteries here. If Lahan’s grandfather was to be believed, that freak was somewhere in this mansion, also under lock and key. He might be lackadaisical to a fault, but Maomao wasn’t sure he would have let himself be apprehended that easily.

“You think that old fart is telling the truth?” Maomao asked.

Lahan scratched at his tousled hair. “Can’t be sure he isn’t.”

“And the old guy?”

“Maomao... There’s something I haven’t told you,” Lahan said rather abruptly. “The courtesan he bought from the Verdigris House last year—she wasn’t in the best of health.”

“I imagine not.”

The woman had already looked as if she might die at any moment. And who should buy this expiring wisp of a courtesan but the eccentric strategist?

“That’s why my honored foster father didn’t come on this trip.”

Was that why Rikuson had been so insistent that Maomao should go to the strategist’s place? Maomao leaned on the windowsill. The window had wooden bars on it and didn’t appear to offer much chance of escape. Past the bars she could see farmers working in the fields. What in the world were they growing out there?

“Father rarely regarded people as, well, people. But after he welcomed that courtesan into his home, he changed dramatically. It was embarrassing to see, quite frankly.”

“Oh?”

“They would play Go and Shogi every day. Go more often, I suppose. Which was bad news when he had to go out to work. He would take a board diagram with him, and after he made a move, a messenger would be sent back to the house to put the stone on the board, then record the responding move and come back to court. Again and again.”

Yes, Maomao saw, that would indeed be annoying. She felt for the messenger.

“The messenger was always quite busy—right up until the turn

of the year. After that, he found himself with more and more free time."

"Whatever you think you're getting at, it has nothing to do with me." She didn't believe the eccentric strategist would simply let himself be captured, carted off from a courtesan he felt so strongly about. In other words, it had simply been her time. She'd probably lasted longer than she would have if she'd been left to live out her days in the pleasure district. Perhaps it was that thought which enabled Maomao to seem so calm. To others, she might even have appeared cold—but when you were involved in medicine, you ended up being confronted with people dying on a regular basis. If you spent all your time weeping about it, you'd never get to the next patient.

Although there are some *who shed tears every time*, she thought. Some who, although they might do better just to get used to it, never did. Some who never learned to simply accept it. Some like her adoptive father. She thought it was inept, stupid; but that was exactly why she respected him so much.

"Nothing to do with you? Don't be so bleak. If that courtesan did die, I don't believe even my honored foster father could endure the shock."

"And you think they used that opportunity to bring him here?"

It was a ridiculous idea. In spite of it all, the old freak was a high official. If he were to go missing for ten whole days, one could expect consternation from a lot more people than just his adopted son.

When Maomao voiced this objection, however, Lahan responded: "When he bought out his courtesan, he ended up taking off work for two weeks. And when he got back, there was still hardly any work waiting for him."

He needs to earn his damn living!

Or everyone else needed to admit that they didn't actually need him after all.

"The point is this: as long as everyone *else* is doing their jobs, then short of an outright crisis, they could probably continue to function for a good six months before anyone noticed he was gone."

Honestly. Why doesn't the Emperor just fire him?

Maomao started to worry that maybe the strategist had some sort of leverage over the ruler. Or maybe it was simply because the freak *was* so good at picking talented subordinates.

“Sounds a little half-assed to me. Are courtiers just a lazier, sloppier bunch than I thought?”

“All I can say to that is...well, he’s my father.”

Maomao heaved a sigh.

“If I had to guess, I would say Grandfather and the others have locked Father up in hopes of causing the family headship to appear vacant and thereby get it given to them,” Lahan said.

“Family politics aren’t really my thing. How do they decide who gets to be head of the clan?”

She’d heard that the old freak had stolen the family headship from Lahan’s grandfather, but she didn’t understand the specifics. Maybe there was some kind of paperwork involved, something that showed who owned what.

“Typically, among the named clans, there’s an object that’s passed down along with the name. Whoever possesses it is head of the clan, and they bring it with them when they present themselves at the palace. Obviously, of course, they aren’t at the palace every day—just on special occasions. Usually the heirloom would be kept somewhere safe. When the head of the family changes, the former head accompanies the new one when they formally greet the Emperor. I know they say Father ‘stole’ the family headship, but in reality that procedure was still observed.”

“How did he manage that?”

Judging by what she’d seen of Lahan’s grandfather, he didn’t seem like the type to give up his office quietly. Would he really have just politely gone with...well, *you-know-who* to see the Emperor?

“It was quite simple: Grandfather was forced out. He was never one for beautiful numbers, you see.”

“Let me guess—*you* found the proof.” She wondered if it would have been inappropriate to ask aloud how old he’d been at the time.

“What Grandfather was up to was...well, no more than petty, so he himself would be the only one punished. Grandfather said the revelation would tarnish the family name, but Father hardly cared about such things.”

So “Grandfather” was to be dragged down from his height, and he could choose either to do it as a criminal, or to surrender the headship—and it was none other than his grandson who had helped put him in that position. *Beautiful numbers*, indeed. Lahan had probably *enjoyed* helping the old freak, doing all that research.

“I suddenly understand why they don’t treat you like family around here.”

“I’m sorry? What an odd change of subject…”

And the man himself didn’t even see it! Yes, he was that freak’s nephew all right.

“Okay, but they’ve spent all this time living quietly out here in the boonies, right? Why would they decide to act now?”

“I can think of a few reasons they might.” Lahan started counting on his fingers. “One: public documents in this country are disposed of after ten years. Or I guess you could say they wear away; anything that isn’t extremely important just isn’t preserved carefully. The proof I found of the pocket change my grandfather stole would only mean anything if they could compare it to those papers.” He held up another finger. “Two: they might have found some sort of leverage over him, something they could threaten him and protect themselves with if need be. Though they’d be risking his wrath, of course.”

He turned toward Maomao, and she backed away from him uneasily. Of course, at the moment, the wrath would come not on account of Maomao, but the courtesan. “You think they could get information like that way out here?” she asked.

“Well, hold on. Let me finish,” Lahan said, and held up a third finger. “Three: someone *gave* them that information.”

Oh! The situation suddenly started to sound familiar. “You think that’s what’s happening here too?”

Here too: both the bandits who had attacked Consort Lishu and the story about the fortune-teller in the western capital had made her think of the “white” immortal. The MO was similar in both cases.

“I’m only floating a possibility. But one that can’t be ruled out.”

Yes, he was right. They couldn’t be sure about anything, but they should work on the assumption that it was possible. That, however, left Maomao with a question. “If all these incidents are related, then one thing bothers me.”

“What?”

She couldn’t shake the sense that the shadow of the White Lady hung over the succession of mysterious events lately, and several things about this one smelled of the same perpetrator. But she wondered: “We’ve had cases in both the east and the west that could seem to involve the immortal. Do you think she’s actually

connected to them all somehow?" She would have to be *extremely* fleet-footed. "Even if we assume it's not the Lady herself, but her agents, doing the work, information would seem to travel too quickly."

"True..."

The fortune-teller in the western capital might have acted a lot like the White Lady, but how would she have heard of the half-sister of Consort Lishu, who was far away in the east? If they were sharing information, how were they doing it? The question remained unanswered.

"What if the White Lady had a coconspirator in the capital?" Lahan asked. Then she would be able to find out who would be traveling west.

"How do we explain the very existence of the fortune-teller, then? She was already there at least ten days ago."

"That's exactly it. It seems impossible," Lahan groaned.

"Still..." Maomao murmured, gazing out the window.

"Still what?" Lahan asked.

"I can't help wondering if they're going to feed us," she said, looking at the fields. The farmers were still working industriously.

Maomao's fears turned out to be unfounded. They were given a meal, and it wasn't bad. Decent ingredients—meat and fish. The fish was a little salty. The farther inland one went, the more frequently one encountered salted seafood. Fish in the capital was taken fresh from the sea and rushed to diners by swift horse, so one never saw pickled seafood there.

What turned out to be surprisingly tasty were the sesame buns. They were filled, not with sesame paste, but with crushed chestnuts or red beans or something. The filling was thick and sweet; maybe they'd used honey or syrup to give it that consistency.

No, wait. Is this...sweet potato? she wondered, chewing the food thoughtfully. That would make sense.

Even Maomao, who wasn't a big fan of sweet treats, ate two of the buns; Lahan wolfed down no fewer than five of them.

"Look at you go. I'm almost impressed," Maomao said.

"For your information, using one's brain makes one crave sweet food," Lahan replied, then stuffed another bun into his mouth.

"I wonder if the family here has a sweet tooth," Maomao said.

Sweet potatoes were an unusual food item. Having lived in both

the Verdigris House and the rear palace, Maomao had encountered them before, but they weren't readily available in the marketplace. The rest of the ingredients involved in the meal were unremarkable —maybe the people here were particular about their filling.

"Not really. At least, I don't recall them being that way. I mean, not that they hate sweets, either."

"Hm." Maomao sipped her post-meal tea. This time it didn't taste of roasted barley, but of actual tea leaves. Then, grabbing onto a passing thought, she said, "I don't think we've seen your dad yet. What's going on with him?"

"Yes, what *is* he doing? I wanted to see him too," Lahan said, licking the grease off his fingers as he spoke. It reminded Maomao of the fox-eyed strategist, and earned him a scowl. "Do you think this father of yours is caught up in all this?" she asked.

"Hmm. I doubt it. My foster father only asked that the clan head's seat be vacated. Rumors have a way of spreading, though, and my grandfather was a proud man. He found he couldn't stay in the capital any longer. Dad, he could have stayed there if he'd wanted. He just chose not to."

"A fact your mother seems distinctly less than pleased about."

Lahan smiled sardonically. "Yes, it was Grandfather who chose Mom. She and my foster father get along like oil and water."

It would have been more surprising if they had been friends, really; Maomao pictured the arch woman and felt a pang of sympathy.

"I do wonder about the wisdom of putting us both in the same room. I hope they'll at least give us separate places to sleep," Maomao said.

"If they make us sleep in the same room, who cares? It's not like anything's going to happen."

"You've got that right."

That was all there was to say about it; they both looked at each other as if they couldn't believe they were having this conversation.

"Speaking of which, have you and the Emperor's younger brother—"

"I think I'll get some shut-eye," Maomao said, flopping over onto the bed beside her.

"Hey! Where am I going to sleep?"

"There's a couch right there."

"You should have more respect for your elders!"

"I thought you elders were supposed to dote on us kids."

Lahan evidently had some issue with this arrangement, but Maomao didn't let it bother her. Instead she lay in bed, trying to get the facts straight in her head.

Lahan and the eccentric strategist did appear to be giving the former head of the clan and his family enough money to live on—they had the resources to hire servants, after all, although perhaps not to update their furniture to the cutting edge of luxury or eat fancy food at every meal. It seemed like a sweet enough arrangement to Maomao, but someone who had once lived in the lap of luxury in the capital might well find it deeply degrading. The humiliation had festered over many long years, and now was on the point of explosion—but who had lit the fuse?

Maomao recalled the white bracelet Lahan's mother had been wearing. She hadn't gotten a very good look at it, but it had reminded her of the white, snakelike twist of rope. She hoped it wasn't just a misunderstanding—but it brought back some bad memories.

That "immortal" sure is tenacious, Maomao thought. She was like a phantom; her traces seemed to be everywhere. It was almost enough to convince Maomao that she really did have the supernatural ability to be in many places at once.

Maomao fell asleep wishing someone would hurry up and catch the woman.

The next thing she knew, it was evening. She came out of the bedroom yawning to discover not only Lahan, but his nasty old grandfather. If it had been just Gramps, she might have body-slammed him and tried to escape, but she could see a servant behind him.

The old man's face twisted when he saw Maomao. Maybe she still had bedhead? Or eye goobers? Maybe the pillow had left a mark on her cheek and he didn't like it.

"We're going," Grandfather said, and left the room before Maomao could object. She and Lahan shared a look, but since the alternative to going was presumably just being locked up again, they went.

"It looks like you really are Lakan's daughter," Grandfather remarked, but Maomao didn't say anything; there was no reason for her to respond to that. It gave away, though, that the family had been looking into matters while she'd been asleep. She wondered

how they had managed that when she figured she hadn't slept more than four hours.

"The man's a complete half-wit," Grandfather went on. "Whatever we do, whatever we say, he just mumbles to himself. Doesn't even try to talk to us. But your name... Your name, at least, he remembers."

Maomao stopped in her tracks. This conversation suggested something about who was going to be at their destination, and she didn't like it.

"I know you're not a big fan, but we'd better go. Arguing won't get us anywhere right now," Lahan said, and unfortunately, he was right. Maomao started walking again.

They were headed for a building on the edge of the estate, with big, round windows with bars on them. You could see right inside—meaning you could see the filthy, middle-aged man on the floor.

The man was lying on his back, his chin bedecked with messy stubble. The hair on his head hung loose behind him as if he'd swept it away in annoyance. A grimy bowl was on the floor beside him. Grains of rice were stuck to his clothes and fingers, as if he'd been eating with his hands instead of chopsticks.

"Father!" Lahan cried, rushing up to the bars. The sight of the man, obviously out of it, must have stirred something in him.

There did indeed appear to be something wrong with him. His mouth kept moving, forming silent words—he looked as if he were an addict going through withdrawal of some kind. Lahan had apparently had the same thought, for he turned to the elderly man. "Grandfather, I know you said Father wouldn't listen to you, but you didn't give him opium or something, did you?!"

"Hmph, I can't speak to that. But I *do* want him to cough up the location of the heirloom." The old man looked at Lahan imperiously. Then he spread his arms and said, "Anyway, I didn't summon him. *He* summoned *me*, and I went to the capital for him. He was like this when I found him."

Maomao actually agreed with him—this definitely wasn't opium poisoning.

"There were no servants or anybody else at the house. Just *him*, the codger, bent over a Go board and muttering to himself."

Grandfather alleged that he'd brought the strategist here on the grounds that there was no one else around.

No one? Maomao wondered. She looked at Lahan: that didn't

seem possible. “Did he have to fire all his servants or something because he was too deep in debt to pay them?”

“No, he retained a minimum of household help. He needed someone to do the cooking and cleaning, and to look after the patient.” Then, however, Lahan added: “Still... I figured this might happen.”

What was he referring to? Rather, who: he had to mean the courtesan the strategist had taken in last year. The servants might all be gone, but she would still be there—and the fox-eyed strategist wouldn’t have gone away and just left her at home. The fact that he was here and looking shell-shocked must mean that the courtesan had died.

He looked as if his very soul had fled his body—and yet, the body moved. He appeared to be facing something that could not be seen. He was sitting before someone who was no longer there.

“Can’t you do something for him, Maomao?” Lahan asked. Just for an instant, the eccentric strategist twitched, but then he resumed his relentless mumbled litany. He was in bad shape.

“You’re supposed to be what passes for his children. Don’t you have any idea where the family jewels might be?!” Grandpa demanded.

“I’m afraid you can yell all you want, sir, but...” Lahan said, shaking his head.

Maomao was more direct: “I have no idea.” She, too, shook her head.

“Then maybe you remember *this*!” The old man took a sheaf of papers from the folds of his robes. They were covered with numbers of some kind. “Lakan had this on him. This sort of thing is your specialty, Lahan. These numbers must reveal a hidden location or *something*!”

The old man was evidently under the impression that the numbers were some kind of code. Lahan took the paper and squinted at it. Maomao peeked over his shoulder.

They both saw what it was immediately. The paper had two numbers on it side by side, and there were dozens of pages.

They also knew that the sheaf didn’t contain the answer the old man was looking for—but under the circumstances, there was no reason to tell him that right away. Instead, they felt they needed to do something about the deflated freak. Frankly, Maomao would have been just as happy not to have anything to do with him, but

sooner begun was sooner done.

"Do you have a Go board in this house?" she asked.

"The hell does that have to do with anything?!"

"Do you have one?" she repeated, not changing her tone. The old man clucked and called for a servant, who brought a Go board and stones.

They entered the strategist's room. When the board was placed in front of him, his shoulders shivered. Maomao sat across from him, on the other side of the board. She took the black stones, while Lahan placed the white ones where the strategist could reach them.

Maomao picked up a black stone and placed it on the board, following the numbers written on the paper. In response, the freak took a white stone and set it on the board with a *click*.

She believed the papers were notes kept by the messenger while the strategist and his courtesan played Go. In addition to the two numbers, running numbers had been carefully inscribed along the upper right. Maomao simply played according to the numbers, and the strategist responded.

Maomao wasn't a particularly good Go player. She knew that the opening part of the game involved something called *joseki*, sequences of moves that were largely set. Thus, she could expect the strategist to make the same moves he had in the actual game. She just kept turning the pages, playing, and turning the pages again, until she was down to the last three sheets.

Lahan, watching, cocked his head. "That was a bad move." He was referring to the stone Maomao had just placed—but she'd played it exactly according to the paper.

The strategist narrowed his eyes for a moment and then, *click*, he made another move.

"Putting the stone there... It would have to be a sacrifice play. But why? Why would she do it that way?" Lahan muttered. Maomao didn't know much about Go, but Lahan had some acquaintance with it. Whatever—she just kept playing the way the paper said.

When they reached the end of the paper, though, they were still in the middle game.

"No... You'd never make a mistake like that," the monocled freak murmured. There were grains of rice stuck to his stubble, and Maomao had to fight down the urge to tell him to wash his damn face. "You know I would never miss it... So why?"

The strategist didn't move to play the white stone in his hand; he just stared at the board.

After a silent moment, Maomao grumbled, "Maybe she was just sick of normal moves?" She didn't know much about Go, but over the many, many years of its existence, common wisdom had been established: *With such-and-such a board situation, this is how you should play.* Then the other player would likewise respond in a particular way.

"It's certainly true, you'd normally do *this* in this situation. Then the response is *here*, and then black moves *here*..." Monocle kept mumbling to himself, fretting with the white stone in his fingers—but then he seemed to come to some kind of realization. *Click*. The stone went on the board.

"But that..." Lahan said, his expression darkening. Apparently, it wasn't a very good move either. Without the paper to guide her, Maomao no longer knew where to play, so instead she slid the bowl of black stones toward the strategist. He picked one up and clicked it down on the board.

Lahan, who obviously knew more about Go than Maomao did, folded his arms and watched. At first he looked skeptical, but one of the ensuing moves seemed to spark something in his mind, and his eyes widened.

"Hey! This is no time to sit around playing games!" Gramps burst out. "Hurry up and—"

"Hush," Lahan said. "It's just getting good."

He watched the board with a studious expression. Getting good? The freak was playing himself! Then again, in his own mind, it seemed to be someone else holding the black stones. The color gradually returned to his formerly ghostly pallor.

The only sound was the *click*, *click* of stones on the board, move after move after move.

Finally the freak stopped. "We're down to the endgame." He set down his hand as if to indicate he was through playing. Then he squinted at the board. "The outcome is pretty well obvious. Including five and a half points *komi*, black wins by one and a half points."

Lahan looked at the board too. "I'll be. He's right," he said. Evidently he was just as quick at reading territory in Go as he was at every other kind of calculation.

The strategist pulled his knees to his chest and rested his chin

on them. He rolled a Go stone across his fingers, still staring at the board. “I had to wonder. I just kept asking myself—how could you go before our last game was finished? You always hated to lose. I was sure you wouldn’t leave before it was over.” The words seemed to tumble out of his mouth. “And I wondered, why would you make a move like that one? It had to be a mistake, I was sure—even though I knew you would never make a mistake.”

He was talking to himself; what he was saying wasn’t directed at any of them. He was interrupted by the old man.

“Hey! Lakan! Where are the family jewels? I want that treasure, now!” He shoved Lahan aside and loomed in front of the eccentric strategist.

The strategist looked up at him balefully for a second and muttered, “You’re a rather noisy Go stone.” But then he clapped his hands and said, “Ah! Father, is that you?”

“‘Father, is that you?’ Pfah! Don’t you remember your own parent’s face?!”

It wasn’t a matter of remembering, though; the man simply couldn’t distinguish one face from another.

“Parent? Ah, yes... Yes, that reminds me...” He sounded completely out of it, but he took a cloth-wrapped package from his robe. “I’m afraid I’m telling you this rather, ahem, belatedly, but I’ve taken a wife.”

Inside the package was hair. About five *sun* in length, tied with a hair tie. Maomao knew whom it belonged to.

Grandfather turned beet red and aimed a blow of the cane in his hand at the strategist’s temple.

“Father!” Lahan cried, rushing up. Maomao took a handkerchief from the folds of her own robe. The cane had slid down the strategist’s temple, brushed his cheek, and wound up hitting his nose. He hadn’t taken a direct blow to the face, but his nose was still dripping blood.

“You’re always like this! You never listen to what I say, just babble about things that make no sense! And just when I think you’re completely self-absorbed... This! What is *this*?!” Gramps was pointing at the sheaf of papers. “Are you mocking me again?!”

“I’m not mocking you. This is why I called you.”

Maomao suspected that much, at least, was true. The man might make an ass of himself around court, but she had a sense that he hadn’t done the same thing with this old guy. Lahan’s

grandfather had talked about the strategist summoning him—to think, this was the reason.

However, that was to speak from the strategist's perspective. Sometimes people simply couldn't understand each other, parent and child or no. The elderly man and the eccentric strategist were simply too different.

"Whatever. The jewels, man. Make with the jewels!" Gramps was in high dudgeon now. He grabbed his cane again—and a blade emerged from within it. It was a sword-cane. "You know what'll happen to you if you hold out on me, right?"

The strategist looked up, but not at the blade. His eyes were fixed on something else. "Maomao? What are you doing here?"

So he had noticed her at last. Maybe he would never have been so pliant if he hadn't. It just went to show how intent he had been on his game. "So you've come to see your daddy!"

"*No.*" Maomao wished he would focus on the situation they were in. Sensing danger, she moved to the wall.

"Ah, Maomao is here! Today, we must have a feast!" the strategist said, clutching the hair clipping. Then he turned the hand toward Maomao. "Won't you say anything? Just a word, to your mother..." He looked at her with the strangest of expressions. With his haggard face and filthy beard, he suddenly looked many years older.

Normally, Maomao might have simply ignored him—but now, surprisingly, she dipped her head respectfully in the direction of the hair. No, she had nothing to say, but she could do that much.

"Don't ignore me, dammit!" the infuriated old man bellowed, brandishing his sword-cane. Age had taken its toll on him, but he had been a soldier once, and he was still sturdier than they might have expected. Facing him were a strategist who was a soldier who left all the real work to his subordinates; a dyed-in-the-wool civil official whose weapon of choice was the abacus; and Maomao, who had no confidence that she would be of any help in a fight.

The three wusses scattered—and it was all they could do to escape the old man and his flailing cane. Servants stood behind Grandfather, but obviously weren't going to help anyone. Maomao, seeking any kind of safety, hid behind a post.

Then, though, they heard a slow, calm voice. "Put that away; it's dangerous. What if you actually hit somebody with it?"

Maomao looked to see the old man floating in midair, his legs

kicking. He dangled from weathered hands that gripped his arms; holding him was a man with sun-darkened skin and a handkerchief around his neck. His clothes marked him out as a farmer—maybe the one Maomao had seen from the window of her room. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and very well built, but his eyes were gentle and serene.

"Hey, what are you doing?! Let me go!"

"Yes, yes. As soon as you give me that sword," the burly farmer said, plucking the weapon away from the old man and putting it back in its cane. "When did you find the time to make this?" he murmured. The servants, rather than trying to help Grandfather, looked downright relieved to see the farmer.

Who's this? Maomao thought, but her question was promptly answered.

"It's been too long, Dad," Lahan said, bowing his head.

"Ah, you look well. Despite the somewhat dire straits I found you in. That girl there—is that my niece?" The farmer tossed the sword cane to one of the servants, and his already gentle face softened even more. The man looked like a bear, yet his presence was warm, comforting.

"May I take that to be my little brother who's just come in?" the eccentric strategist said, smiling.

"You may, although I might wish you would learn to know who I was one of these days," Lahan's father said, smiling sardonically.

He still hadn't let go of the old man, who continued to kick. "I'm doing this for you, blast it! Don't you want your birthright back?!"

"Me? Not particularly."

"And you can live with that?! You weakling!"

"That's right! You always were that way!" Suddenly Lahan's mother was there. She didn't seem to get along with the strategist very well; she must have heard the commotion and come to investigate. Lahan's father looked disturbed to find himself confronted with another critic.

"What good would it do for me to inherit the family headship? A buffoon running the household could only embarrass everyone."

His resigned tone only aggravated the old man and Lahan's mother.

"You'd still be better than that jackass!" Gramps shouted.

The jackass in question was grinning stupidly at Maomao. It

was supremely disgusting.

"Don't you love our son? Don't you want to see him inherit the headship?" Lahan's mother pressed.

"But Lahan's our son too," the farmer protested. Apparently the son the woman was referring to was Lahan's older brother, whom they'd met earlier. It seemed Lahan was considered a traitor and no longer her child.

The house appeared to be divided: some who had been following the old man's orders until moments before were now looking at Lahan's father, openly torn.

"What good would it do for me to inherit the headship at this point, anyway?" Lahan's father said. "There's no one to replace me, is there?" Then he added: "Besides, maybe no one would care if my dear brother Lakan didn't come back, but I think Lahan would be missed." His tone was placid, kind.

At that moment, a servant came running up. "Master! There's a man named Rikuson here..."

Gramps and Mom both scowled at that. "S-So what?! Throw him out on his ear!"

"B-But sir, he's got several other men who appear to be, uh, soldiers with him..."

"You know, I do seem to recall there being a garrison around here," Lahan said as if it were just occurring to him. But it was a scripted line if Maomao had ever heard one.

"Damn! D-Did you count on that when you decided to come here?!"

"Oh, no, nothing of the sort. Although it seems it certainly didn't hurt."

His insouciant tone stoked Gramps's anger; the old man pounded the wall with a wrinkled hand. "I'm surrounded by idiots! Incompetents! My whole family is an embarrassment!" Now he was stomping on the ground so hard it seemed like he might put a foot clear through the floor. "I've got one son who never has any idea who he's talking to, and another who thinks he's a farmer! Curse the womb that bore them both! I should've had another son—maybe that one would have come out right!"

The old man's fury showed no sign of abating. His listeners refused to look at him; with what he was saying, even Lahan's mother found her lip curling.

"And then there's Luomen—never could use a sword, and then

he got himself mutilated! Is there even one person worth my time around here?!"

Maomao was suddenly in motion. She darted out from behind the post, grabbing the bowl on the ground—the strategist's leftover soup. The next moment, she was in front of Gramps, and then she dumped the rotten stuff all over the old man.

"What the hell are you doing?!" Gramps raged. He slapped Maomao with an open palm, leaving her cheek burning.

Maomao stumbled backward. "Maomao!" the strategist cried. He tried to catch her, but she dodged him deftly. The old man's hand she hadn't been able to avoid, but the strategist she could easily escape from.

"I just didn't like your tone," Maomao said in a quiet voice. It was the wrong thing to do, so if she got hit for it she would just have to live with it. But she had wanted to stop the old man from ridiculing her old man. "I won't hear you say another word against my adoptive father. What I'm saying is, please shut up!"

"You mouthy little trollop! Just who do you think I am?"

Who? Maomao thought. In her opinion, it was the old man who didn't understand who he was.

"Without that heirloom, you're just a frail old man who doesn't know how to have confidence in himself," Maomao said with a smile. Her lip was split, but that was a minor detail.

The old man's face went tight, and Lahan's mother blanched as well.

"Forget the family name. Forget the headship. What have you done with your own two hands to be proud of?" Maomao asked.

"Listen to this scrawny whelp..."

The fact that he responded not with an actual reply, but with inarticulate cruelty, was answer enough. He'd coasted along on the family headship, committing a series of minor offenses. She didn't know whether his failure to push into the territory of serious corruption was down to a genuine rational streak or simple cowardice.

Maomao had a few more things she would have liked to say to the old man, but then someone was standing between the two of them.

"I'm sorry, young lady, but please. That's enough." The owner of the kind voice was Lahan's father, his eyebrows furrowed in concern. "I know you cherish your uncle, but please do remember

that this man is my father." His face, with its hint of sorrow, reminded her of her own old man, Luomen.

With an effort, she swallowed what she had been about to say.

Chapter 7: The La Clan (Part Two)

"I *wondered* what was going on..." Rikuson heaved a sigh. He had eventually made his way into the mansion, and Gramps and Lahan's mother were now sequestered in a separate room. Rikuson had made the call within moments of seeing the strategist's beleaguered state. Truly, he was another of the fine subordinates the freak had found for himself.

"I'm very sorry. If my brother Lakan had regained his sanity sooner, this could all have been over much quicker," Lahan's father said, sounding tired. Maomao felt a strange affinity for him, perhaps because he so much resembled Luomen—not in his appearance, but in something less tangible.

Figuring the "prison" room wasn't exactly congenial, they'd moved to another part of the house. At the moment, Lahan, his father, Maomao, Rikuson, and the strategist were all together, along with several men Rikuson had brought with him. Maomao felt a little bad for them having come all this way when ultimately they hadn't been needed. Rikuson would give only his official story, namely that they'd come to bring their superior officer back home, but there was no question the men were intended to intimidate.

Maomao, meanwhile, didn't want to be in the same room as the freak strategist, but she knew she couldn't be pushy about it just then. In the blink of an eye, though, he was beside her and jabbering about something. She wished he would shut up. She knew she ought to take pity on him in his weakened state, but she discovered she just wasn't able.

"Maomao, we should go have a dress made for you sometime. We'll get lots of the finest fabric, and we can have a hair stick made too!" the strategist said.

Maomao didn't say anything.

"And then we should get all dressed up and we can go see a show! Yes, let's do that!"

Maomao didn't say anything.

"You like books, don't you, Maomao? I've got an idea—why

stop at just reading them? What if you were to *make* a book yourself?"

Even when she ignored him, he wouldn't let up. She almost twitched at the idea of making her own book, but she managed to force down the reaction.

"Elder Brother, we're trying to talk, here. Perhaps you could sit quietly for a moment?" Lahan's father, the strategist's younger brother, tried to talk him down, but without much conviction. Neither Lahan—the strategist's adopted son—nor Rikuson—his subordinate—could be too forceful with him either. So eventually, every gaze in the room settled on Maomao. She frowned mightily, but she was cornered.

She gave a sniff and made a face of exaggerated disgust. "You stink. You smell like a feral dog who's been out in the rain," she said.

The strategist brought his own sleeve to his nose and sniffed. Then he looked at Lahan's father. "Where's the bath?"

"Take a right out of this room and it's at the end of the hall. I'll ask the servants to get it ready for you right away."

"Yes, please. Right away," the strategist said, and left the room.

"And don't forget to brush your teeth," Maomao called after him. (One for the road.) If they were lucky, they wouldn't see him for at least an hour.

"I guess it's tough, having a daughter," Lahan's father commented sadly. "Not that I was able to get through to him on my own."

"Just watching it breaks your heart," Rikuson agreed, sipping his tea.

"Be that as it may, you got here awfully quickly," Lahan said to him. "I thought you might take your time yet."

Lahan had been staying at an inn near the ship's landing, and Lahan must have known that when he and Maomao failed to return, Rikuson would get suspicious and come to the mansion. But it hadn't even been an entire day since they'd left—a rather short timeline.

"I had a tip," Rikuson replied, gesturing at Lahan's father.

"Not so much from me personally," the man said. "Someone else went and told them. Someone who doesn't always own up to his true feelings." Lahan's father looked out the window, where Lahan's older brother could be seen listlessly dragging a green vine

around. “He moans about being stuck doing farmer’s work, but you see how devoted he is to it. No, he isn’t always forthcoming about his feelings, but he’s a good boy.”

“He’s just okay. I guess he’s not a bad person,” Maomao said.

“My older brother’s not precisely a paragon of virtue, but he’s not capable of true evil,” Lahan added.

“Erm, the two of you aren’t exactly bursting with praise,” Rikuson said, watching the young man in the fields with a touch of pity.

“They say the father exists for his son and his grandson, but it doesn’t seem like that to me. That boy’s even less cut out for politics than I am,” Lahan’s father said. With his tanned skin and hulking body, he looked like he could have made a very capable soldier, but ultimately one had to reckon with personality. Sometimes a person was more suited to the hoe than the sword or the spear. This man looked every inch the farmer.

“I do have to wonder,” Lahan said, cocking his head. “Why would they bring all this up now? If they were waiting for the evidence of Grandfather’s corruption to be expunged, I would have expected them to move sooner.” Maomao wasn’t sure that was such a smart thing to say with Rikuson sitting right there, but apparently it was all right.

“A fair question. Lakan called for your grandfather on account of his new bride. And that was fine, as far as it went. Normally, I think my father would simply have ignored him and not gone to the capital. Except...” Lahan’s father took a piece of braided rope from the folds of his robes. Although his earth-stained fingers had darkened it, it was clear that it had originally been white. It was much like the one Lahan’s mother had worn around her wrist.

“I am so *sick* of those things,” Maomao said, pointedly looking away from it.

“Uh... I haven’t said anything about it yet,” Lahan’s father said, appearing bemused.

“You don’t have to. Let me guess—your wife fell under the sway of some fortune-teller or something.”

“That’s exactly right.”

“And she asked how that freak was doing.”

“I don’t know for certain. But we learned there was no one around him...”

The freak’s adopted son Lahan and his close attendant Rikuson

were both in the western capital. Even if the strategist were to disappear, the two people most likely to notice weren't around.

Frustrated, Maomao picked up something on the table. The servant had evidently brought it to accompany the tea. It looked sort of like a dry, flat daikon with white powder on top. The fact that it was on a plate meant it was presumably food. It was sweet, yet chewy; it was stringy, but not unpleasant.

Is this sweet potato?

Maomao had eaten processed sweet potato before, but almost always stuff that had been steamed and turned into a paste. This one appeared to have been cooked and dehydrated.

"This is pretty good. Am I right that this is sweet potato?" she asked.

"Oh!" Lahan exclaimed, leaning forward as if he had suddenly remembered something. "That's right! Dad—you said something about an interesting potato?"

"Hm? Potato? Oh! Yes. Yes, I suppose so."

Lahan grabbed some of the snack off Maomao's plate. "You said you thought you might have an idea—did you mean this?"

"Mm. It's steamed and dried potato. No sugar, no honey, but it's sweeter than chestnuts or pumpkin, isn't it?" He gestured out the window as if to say, *There it is.* Maomao had wondered what was in the fields—it was these potatoes.

Lahan squinted and adjusted his glasses. "How much are you growing?"

"We're trying to expand as much as we can. Wouldn't want any of the fields to go to waste."

"You seem to lack sufficient help."

"Some of the farmers in the area come and help us out. We've got more potatoes than we know what to do with." They seemed happy to help in exchange for all the potatoes they could get. "Oh! But don't worry. We haven't sold them in the open market, just like you said, Lahan. When we do sell them, we make sure it's only product, not raw potatoes."

"That's fine, then."

Maomao found herself perplexed by the conversation. Were Lahan and his father trying to corner the market on sweet potatoes? Was it Lahan's fault that Maomao had only ever seen sweet potatoes as an ingredient, not raw? She would have gladly grown some sweet potatoes for herself if she could have gotten her hands on a

raw one.

"It's such a waste, though," Lahan's father said. "We've got more potatoes than we could ever need. The storehouse is full. Well, the pigs are pretty happy to have them for slop, I admit. I think it's improved their meat too."

If they had so many sweet potatoes, wouldn't they just stop growing them?

"Last year, one *tan* yielded two hundred *shin* (750 kilograms) of sweet potatoes," Lahan's father said.

"Two hundred *shin*?!" Maomao exclaimed.

"Four times as much as an ordinary rice yield," Lahan said. "Partly thanks to Dad's tinkering, I'm sure, but even so—incredible, right?"

"Is the crop unique to this region?" Maomao demanded, leaning toward Lahan's father.

"Not at all. A long time ago, I bought a sprout that I thought was an expensive but interesting-looking morning glory—but it was from the south. It turned out to be a different plant, although one that looked similar. Something you grow with rootstock, not seeds. I didn't have any luck getting it to flower, and I became bent on trying to get a blossom out of it." He gazed out the window. "After we came here, we had plenty of space in the fields. I knew flowers sometimes only bloom under specific conditions, but at times they also produce unusual byproducts. Like this." He plucked off a piece of the dried potato.

Intrigued, he had started to play around with processing his rootstock in various ways. "When I looked into it, I discovered this was a tuber called a sweet potato—sweeter than chestnuts, and able to grow even in poor soil. I think I might be the only person in the whole country growing these things. Lahan told me not to let any seed potatoes out of the village, and that's what I've been doing."

By now, Maomao was starting to get a pretty good idea of what Lahan had wanted from his father. It had to do with what the emissary from Shaoh had said: provisions or asylum. Pick one. What was more, it would serve as a countermeasure to the insect plague that would soon strike them. Lahan, she suspected, was hoping to use his father's potatoes to solve both problems—but no matter how tremendous the yield was from those fields, there was no way they were producing enough to feed an entire country. Even if there were seed potatoes left, it didn't seem like a viable solution.

Lahan's father, though, provided the answer. "You don't have to use rootstock. You can use stems too. You could probably make it work as long as it had been freshly planted."

"Stems, sir?" Maomao asked.

There were ways of growing plants beyond just seeds or potatoes—a stem clipping could be made to work, as long as it put down roots. If they could do that, maybe they could hope for, say, ten times as much yield. (*Yeah, yeah, counting chickens something something.*) But it still wouldn't be enough. Unlike rice, though, the bugs wouldn't go after the potatoes. That was a major advantage.

"Dad, I have a favor to ask you," Lahan said—and then he went on to describe more or less what Maomao had imagined. He wanted to buy up the sweet potatoes, and he wanted seed potatoes and sprouts too. And he wanted his father to tell him how best to grow them, if possible. It turned out he wanted quite a lot.

Maomao thought Lahan was being rather presumptuous—notwithstanding that they were talking to his father—but "Dad" kept smiling. Hardly taking a moment to think, he said, "Sure, I'll be happy to." He sat back in his chair, ground some ink, and started writing out the instructions.

Maomao, her brow wrinkling, said, "Are you sure about this? If you don't lay some ground rules now, you might just get taken to the cleaners here."

"Watch your mouth!" Lahan objected.

"Ha ha ha! I told you we had more of them than we knew what to do with. If you leave us enough to give to the other farmers, that'll be fine. And, er, if our taxes weren't quite so heavy, I'd be happy about that too."

That only made Maomao frown harder. She glanced at Lahan, but he was grinning, obviously working the abacus in his head.

Maomao grabbed the brush from Lahan's father.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

She began writing a contract, the brush moving in quick, decisive strokes. "First, we have to set the price of the potatoes, as well as the sprouts. If you're going to teach him the cultivation methods, that's extra."

"Of course I'll pay for that," Lahan said, as if to say that so much, at least, was obvious even to him. Still, Maomao couldn't bring herself to leave the situation alone. Lahan seemed too much like his foster father.

Lahan read unhappily over the contract Maomao had produced; he seemed to be reconsidering how to handle the amounts.

Then there was a thump and a man covered in mud entered. "I've got it, Father," he said.

"Excellent. Just leave it there."

It was Lahan's older brother, carrying a bucket with a green vine in it. At least one of them must have realized Lahan might be after this—their preparations were very thorough.

Lahan's father picked up the vine. "They taste better if you don't let the vines overgrow. You have to cut back the roots periodically." He showed it to Maomao. "You can boil the excess vines. I think they're pretty good, but my father doesn't agree."

Tasty or not—a crop that would grow even in poor soil, could be grown by vine, and where even the vines were edible? It was like it had been custom-made to prevent famine. Of course, even if they got started now, there was no telling how much they could actually hope to harvest, but given everything that had been said, it sounded like they would certainly get more of this stuff than they ever would of rice, even if it wasn't enough.

So that was why Lahan had been so receptive to the emissary's advances.

"We should've started selling earlier," Maomao said, eliciting wry smiles from Lahan and his father. No doubt Lahan had ordered them not to release the crop into the market because he'd known it was going to be a booming business.

"My father didn't like the idea very much. Complained about having to act like a farmer," Lahan's father said. It seemed a little late to be worried about that with all these fields around. "Besides, if you sell a bunch of a new crop, you're looking at some real headaches with taxes."

It was true that selling always invited taxation. Staple foods like rice and wheat were taxed as a percentage of yield, the amount varying from region to region.

"Vegetables, though—for those, they only take a percentage of what's actually brought to market."

"Because things that rot—well, if you try to store them someplace, they'll just go bad."

Better to collect after the goods had been converted into hard cash. Which category would these potatoes fall under? Potatoes as such probably kept, at least for a while. If they carelessly flooded

the market with raw potatoes, they could be subject to substantial taxes.

"To be fair, if we've got a ton of them just lying around, it doesn't really matter if they take them for taxes," Lahan's father observed.

"Now, Dad, it's important to economize on your taxes."

Maomao shot Lahan a look: what a thing to say, when he was on the side that was collecting. Lahan's father, though, seemed to be enjoying his rural life. Given his build, he could have gotten along pretty well as a soldier, Maomao suspected, but here he was.

"It looks like you enjoy your life here," she remarked casually.

Lahan's father smiled, his eyes sparkling. "I do. So much so I almost feel bad about it." He fiddled with the potato vine as he spoke. "With apologies to my mother and father, I'm grateful to my older brother Lakan. If it weren't for him, I would never have gotten to experience the pleasure of a calm life of fieldwork."

"Think of the trouble he caused to the people he caught in his wake," Lahan said. The eccentric strategist had driven his father—the clan head—and his younger half-brother, who would have been next in line, from the capital in order to claim the family headship. Then he'd adopted his nephew Lahan. That was as much as Maomao knew about the situation, but she trusted that it was true.

It turned out, however, that for Lahan's father, that eviction from the capital had been a blessing in disguise.

"I like it here," he said. "The more you cultivate, the more you can grow. Back in the capital, about the most you could hope to grow was potted plants." His smile made him look much younger than his years. "If what we're doing here can save people from starvation, then I say, take as much as you need! Let the whole country grow potatoes!" He was really getting into this.

"I don't think Grandfather is going to share your positivity," Lahan said.

"Well, there's not much we can do about that. Ten years in exile hasn't softened his pride at all. His life will just go on the way it has been—painfully boring, as far as he's concerned." There was a startling glint of coldness in the man's eyes.

"He always did like to accumulate unbeautiful numbers," Lahan said. He was calculating the size of the field and how many potato sprouts he could plant. The vine cutting would last several days if kept in water.

The reality was that even if they started a field right now, there were no guarantees they would be able to harvest this year. Just as there was no cure-all medicine, there were no perfect answers in politics. You simply had to weigh the pros against the cons and decide what would be most advantageous.

Just as they were thinking about what they would do, the door slammed open.

"Maomaaaao! I've taken my bath!"

In came the strategist, buck naked except for a minimal layer of underwear. Forget eccentric—this was downright sick. He didn't even seem to have taken the time to dry himself completely; his skin and hair were still dripping.

Not bothering to hide her annoyance, Maomao poured some of the now-cold tea into a cup, then took a small bottle from her robes and added several drops of its contents to the drink. She held it out to the strategist.

"M... M... Maomao! You're serving me tea?!"

"Please, have some."

The strategist's eyes brimmed with tears of emotion as he took the cup and downed it in a single gulp.

There was a brief moment of silence. No sooner had he drunk the tea than a shudder passed through his body—and then he collapsed to the floor.

"You *poisoned* him!" Lahan exclaimed.

"It's just alcohol," Maomao replied. The strategist was as vulnerable to liquor as he had always been. If anything, she thought he seemed even less able to hold his drink than before.

Thoroughly not interested in seeing any more of the man's naked body, she brought a blanket from the bedroom and draped it over him. Lahan and Rikuson carried the freak to the couch with looks of exasperation.

"Maybe I was lucky I only have sons," Lahan's father said with a droll smile.

The freak was grinning in a most distressing way. "...ake a..." he mumbled, slurring in his sleep.

"What's that you said, sir?" Rikuson asked, leaning closer.

"I'll make a...a Go—"

Rikuson looked stricken. "He wants to make a Go book for some reason," he said, looking like he didn't really understand. Maomao, though, glanced at the table. Lahan had preserved the

earlier match as a game record.

There were, supposedly, many more records of many more games between the freak and his courtesan—enough to fill a book.

Hrmm...

The sleeping strategist looked very peaceful. Maomao had expected him to be more depressed about things, but it seemed not. He gave no hint of being weighed down by grief, but was his usual freakish self, driving ahead.

"Normally, when one buys a courtesan, one makes her a mistress. Then one doesn't need any approval from one's parents—which would have been convenient, considering the relationship between my honored adoptive father and my grandfather," Lahan told Maomao.

"Yeah, so?"

"Even then, he seems to have wanted to make formal introductions, to the point of calling for my grandfather, whom he'd left here for so long."

This woman is my wife, he'd wanted to say. Clearly, unambiguously.

"Lakan always was a romantic," Lahan's father said.

"Yeah, great." Maomao sat down in a chair as if to make clear that none of this had anything to do with her. She took the potato vine from the bucket and bit into it experimentally. "It's terrible raw," she said, and dumped it back in the bucket with a frown.

Chapter 8: The Conclusion of Lishu's Journey

"It's been a long trip, but it's almost over," Ah-Duo said as she stood on the deck of the ship and savored the breeze.

"Yes." Consort Lishu had a firm grip on the railing. Her seasickness was much better now, but she was always afraid a sudden toss of the boat might throw her off her feet, so she didn't let go. Ah-Duo smiled at her antics; Lishu responded with a pout, suddenly embarrassed.

With them on deck at the moment were a lady-in-waiting, the young woman Ah-Duo referred to as Rei, and two bodyguards.

Rei was dressed in masculine clothing, but seemed to be a woman. Lishu had been flustered around Rei at first, but after a while it occurred to her what was going on. Since Ah-Duo wore men's clothing, too, the two of them made a lovely picture together. Both were tall and slim, simultaneously pretty and cool. Lishu could barely restrain a sigh when she looked at them—of admiration for one, and disappointment that she lacked the easy beauty of the other.

Lishu was sixteen, and she would have liked to say she was still growing, but she'd stopped getting taller last year, and her body seemed unlikely to grow any more womanly from here on out. She'd heard that cow's milk could help with that, and for a while she'd tried to drink it, but it made her sick to her stomach every time, and she eventually gave it up.

To her chagrin, her ladies-in-waiting had discovered her making trips back and forth to the toilet. She knew they called her things like "the hopeless consort" and "trophy consort" behind her back. It made her upset and angry—of course it did—but what could she say? She knew it was true. At least she was aware of the nicknames now. Even that was better, far better, than having no idea what her women were saying, dancing around for them like a jester.

Lishu's thoughts must have shown on her face, for Ah-Duo

asked, “Will you be all right going back to the rear palace?”

Oops! the consort thought, and forced her lips to curve upward in a smile. “I’ll be fine.”

She had allies now, even if only a few. Along with her chief lady-in-waiting, several of Lishu’s other ladies had recently begun to be more considerate toward her. The maid who came to get the laundry occasionally spoke with her too. Lishu could just imagine what her former chief lady-in-waiting must have thought about her talking to someone of such low birth, but ever since the rebuke she’d received after trying to take Lishu’s mirror from her, the woman had been far more quiet.

The laundry maid had told Lishu that there was a book she loved but couldn’t read, so Lishu had been making a copy for her without telling the other ladies-in-waiting. It was a small secret, as secrets went, but with as little excitement as there was in the rear palace, it was enough to set the heart pounding.

Ah-Duo, meanwhile, looked at Lishu with concern. “And can you do your job?”

“I’ll…be fine,” Lishu said again.

Her job: in other words, her duty as a consort. Sometimes that meant officiating at ceremonies, but Lishu knew that wasn’t what Ah-Duo was referring to.

She was talking about the Emperor’s visits.

To this point, His Majesty had never ordered Lishu to be his bedfellow on account of her age. But she was sixteen now—no longer “too young.” When this journey was over, one of those visits would be waiting for her.

“You’re Sir Uryuu’s daughter. What happened on this trip need not affect you. I’m sure you can still talk to the Night Prince.”

The Night Prince—the man who had formerly used the identity of the eunuch Jinshi in the rear palace. It turned out that identity had been a cover; in reality, he was someone whose name could hardly be spoken. People referred to him as “the Emperor’s younger brother” or “the Night Prince” instead.

But as to that subject, Lishu could only shake her head. Yes, she’d been quite smitten with him when he’d been in the rear palace. A youth who looked like he had jumped out of a picture scroll, who always had a gracious smile even for her? She knew very well that it amounted to flattery, because she was an upper consort, but it still made her happy to have someone call her by her

name and say kind things about her.

Before—long ago, when she was callow and ignorant—Lishu might have responded joyfully. The idea that someone so beautiful, someone she had been so taken with, could conceivably become her husband was like a dream.

But Lishu understood: the young man's captivating smile was one he could and would show to anyone and everyone. She'd realized that almost a year ago now.

It was the moment when she'd seen the Imperial younger brother's unguarded smile—not the one like a celestial nymph, but one belonging to an ordinary young man. Lishu had never seen it before, and it stabbed her with the realization that she was not special to him.

"I couldn't. He would be wasted on me," she said.

Ah-Duo grinned at that. "Ho ho. Happy being the Emperor's upper consort, then?"

"Ack! That's not what I—!" Lishu waved her hands as if she could push the idea away. She felt she wasn't even fit to be His Majesty's consort. Empress Gyokuyou and Consort Lihua both seemed to Lishu as if they lived above the clouds, so far removed from her that when she was seated next to them at banquets, she always found herself wondering if it was really acceptable for her to even be there. Sometimes she noticed herself being more high-handed than she needed to with her ladies-in-waiting in an attempt to shore up her own confidence. She burned with shame at the thought.

"No? Then what, if I may ask, *did* you mean?" Ah-Duo gave her a teasing smile.

Lishu puffed out her cheeks—but not too much. Strangely, she never really found it unpleasant when Ah-Duo teased her.

Lishu thought there was someone more suited to the Night Prince—as there was to the Emperor. She was quiet for a long moment.

"What's the matter? Cat got your tongue?" Ah-Duo said, her eyes dancing, but Lishu continued to gaze silently at her. Ah-Duo looked like a handsome young man, but she was a woman. Once, she had even been His Majesty's only consort.

Both Empress Gyokuyou, with the exotic allure of her red hair and green eyes, and Consort Lihua, who was like a blooming rose, and clever, too, were fit to be the centerpiece of His Majesty's garden. But when Lishu asked herself who was most suited of all to stand alongside the Emperor, her mind went back to when His Majesty was still the heir apparent. How he would occasionally pop

his head in to steal a snack when Ah-Duo and Lishu were taking tea together, and would bounce Lishu on his knee. She was an ignorant child, then, and called him Uncle Beardy. It would bring a wry smile to His Majesty's face, while Ah-Duo held her sides laughing.

Now, it seemed unimaginable.

Lishu would munch on some sweet treat and watch them, thinking, *So this is what a husband and wife look like.* She thought they went together better than any couple in the world.

Maybe that was why she couldn't bring herself to accept this, even if she knew it was inevitable. Knew it had been inevitable from the moment she became a consort.

Lishu was, and would be, one more obstacle between Ah-Duo and the Emperor. She knew that love in real life was never as beautiful as it was in the picture scrolls, that this was what she had been born to. Yet she worried that Ah-Duo, whom she adored, would come to despise her because of this. She thought, in fact, that Ah-Duo might still be a consort if Lishu hadn't come to the rear palace.

In her mind, though, neither did that mean she should become the Night Prince's wife. Ultimately, she found herself simply swept along by life, not knowing what she really wanted. She knew love, or perhaps "love," from her scrolls and novels—but she didn't understand what it really was.

"You can just see the capital," Ah-Duo said. Though still hazy in the distance, it was possible to make out the vast outer wall surrounding the palace. "I'll head back to our quarters. I want to get my things in order." Ah-Duo kept only a minimum of serving women; she largely looked after herself. It made her extremely impressive in Lishu's eyes.

"Me too!" Lishu let go of the railing and made to follow Ah-Duo. "Ow!" she exclaimed.

The wood of the railing was somewhat rough, it seemed, for a splinter had pierced her palm. She tried to press her palm with her finger to draw it out, but all she succeeded in doing was making herself bleed. Frustrated by the shock of pain, she found another memory bubbling to mind.

A servant of the Night Prince had saved Lishu two separate times—the first from bandits, the second from a wild beast from a foreign land. On the first occasion, he had easily driven off the bandits, but Lishu, cowering behind, hadn't been able to see his

face. It was only when the lion had attacked that she'd seen him face-to-face for the first time. She'd imagined he would be older, but she realized they couldn't have been more than five years apart. She heard later that he was a member of the Ma clan.

The young man had hurt his hand—was it because of the all-out swing he'd taken at the lion?—and was being tended to; Rei had tried to treat him, but the young man had declined her. The apothecary girl had noticed, however, and given him first aid over his objections. The apothecary was so aloof, and the young man, despite his griping, had allowed himself to be treated. Lishu saw that they must be good friends, and the thought made her sad.

More than once during their stay, she had fretted about whether she ought to thank him, but in the end she was so embarrassed that he'd seen her reduced to a sniffling wreck that she couldn't work herself up to talk to him. The young man might be someone else's servant, but he also came from a respectable house himself. Maybe he took Lishu for a little girl who didn't know her manners. She wished she could at least send him a letter, but her position didn't allow that either. Even if she *could* have sent one, though, she knew she never would have. She just didn't have it in her.

Lishu felt a wave of depression. She returned to her cabin, gazing at the splinter in her hand.

"I guess this is goodbye for a little while, then," Ah-Duo said lightly as she climbed into another carriage. Originally, they were supposed to part ways at the ship's landing, but Lishu had begged, and convinced Ah-Duo to let her share a carriage back to the capital. Lishu really wished they could have been together all the way to the palace, but she gave up on that idea. Ah-Duo might have indulged her, but Lishu could see her own attendant growing ever more uncomfortable. She decided not to bother Ah-Duo any further.

Lishu watched Ah-Duo through the window of her carriage as it departed, and then her own transport started back to the rear palace. The six weeks of travel, to which she was unaccustomed, had been hard on her. She'd spent day after day in a carriage or on a ship, feeling her skin bake under the hot sun. There had been bugs, and to cap it all off, she'd been attacked first by bandits and then by a lion. Talk about kicking someone when she was down.

Yet the truth was, it had been fun. Life in the rear palace

boasted every convenience, but it was boring. Lishu was glad to finally be seeing her ladies-in-waiting after so long, but she knew that included some who didn't like her very much. Without them, though, Lishu would never have been able to maintain her dignity as a consort.

She looked at the lady-in-waiting beside her—ever since the lion attack, she'd served Lishu with a look of fear on her face. She'd been assigned to wait upon the consort by Lishu's father, yet she had all but ignored Lishu—maybe she'd been told to do so by Lishu's half-sister, or maybe she believed the rumors about the consort being an illegitimate child. Maybe both. Lishu was secretly relieved that the woman wouldn't be coming back to the rear palace with her.

The carriage passed through the gate of the palace, the driver presenting a seal that served in lieu of written permission to enter.

Lishu had assumed they would proceed directly to the rear palace, so she was surprised when the carriage came to a halt with the rear palace gate still some ways off. "What's going on?" she asked the lady-in-waiting with her.

Uneasily, the woman tried to get a peek at the driver, then she looked back at Lishu just as uncomfortably. "It appears they wish to speak with you, ma'am."

At that moment, several middle-aged women boarded the carriage. Lishu hadn't seen them in the rear palace—from their outfits, she assumed they were court ladies who served in the palace proper.

"Lady Lishu," said the one in the center, kneeling before her. "Please accept our humblest apologies, but for the next month, you will be asked to live outside the rear palace." She lifted her head and looked Lishu in the eye.

Chapter 9: Homecoming

The horse whinnied as it came to a stop in front of the Verdigris House.

That was a long trip, Maomao thought, climbing out of the carriage and nodding politely to the driver. He unloaded her luggage with a thump. It included the outfits that had been thought necessary for the journey, which were now hers to keep, along with some unique products and unusual medicines from the western capital—and a gigantic load of potatoes.

"Maomao, my goodness... Are you planning to open a new business?" The old madam walked up, a pipe clutched in her withered hand. "I'm happy enough that you got them to send us rice, but I wish you would think about the quantity. The storehouse won't hold any more!"

She grabbed one of the dried potatoes out of a basket. It was raw still, but growing eyes, so it would have to serve for a seed potato.

After the showdown at the quack doctor's village, Maomao had at least wound up with as much rice as they would sell her. She'd let the madam know by letter—the first batch must have arrived already.

"And what's this?" the madam asked, looking at the potato dusted in white powder.

Maomao took it, tore a piece off, and put it in her mouth. For a potato, it was awfully sweet—almost as sweet as a dried chestnut.

The madam took a piece too and chewed. Her eyes narrowed. "It would be better to grill it a little first. It's a bit tough for me." She shouted for one of the menservants, instructing him to haul the basket away.

"Nobody said you could have all of them," Maomao said.

"Nobody had to. I know for a fact you and Chou-u can't eat all those by yourselves. I'm helping you out here, and listen to you. Not even a word of thanks."

The past month and a half clearly hadn't dulled the madam's

stinginess one bit.

Maomao, though, wasn't going to take this lying down. "Even a year's free rent for the apothecary shop was cheap for all that rice, don't you think?" she said. Practically pocket change. She'd written in her letter that instead of paying for the rice directly, the madam could give her free rent. The fact that the old woman hadn't said anything about it, Maomao took for agreement.

"Yeah, yeah. This is separate. You got these for free, right? Well, share with your neighbors," the madam said. "Heeeey, everyone, Maomao's home! And she brought souvenirs!"

The old woman never let up! Her shout brought a crowd of courtesans. Work was over and they should have been resting, but the mercenary impulse was strong.

"Freckles!" Chou-u came bursting out of the crowd, Zulin obediently following her "boss." But there was something else with them... "Yeesh, you sure took your time! You just up and leave, and then you don't come home for nearly two months?! That wasn't part of the deal!"

Yeah, well, Maomao hadn't bargained for it either. What bothered her more, though, was the creature behind them.

"Hey, what's that behind you?" she demanded of Chou-u.

"Don't tell me you forgot about Zulin! What a jerk!"

"That's not what I'm talking about. Behind *her*." Maomao pointed at a calico cat sitting and grooming herself.

"What, you don't remember Maomao? Man, that's cold," Chou-u said.

"Oh, believe me, I remember her," Maomao said. But the furball was supposed to be at the quack's village. What was she doing here in the pleasure district? "What I want to know is, why is she here?"

It was the madam who answered. "She was in with the rice! They couldn't exactly send the cat back by herself, could they? Anyway," she added, "I'd just spotted some mice in the storehouse, so I think she can stay for a while. And she's friendly—makes her popular with the customers. We have to do something about her habit of stealing side dishes at dinner, though."

The madam was a practical woman. She would never keep a pet—but an animal who could make itself useful, that was all right.

Maomao (the girl) gave Maomao (the cat) a dark look. The furball narrowed her eyes, yawned a little, and said, "Meeeow!"

At that moment, someone stumbled out of the apothecary's

shop.

"Y-You're home?" asked the man, Sazen. Maomao had tasked him with running the shop while she was away. He'd never been the most robust-looking person, but now he appeared haggard, and he had an unkempt beard on his face. He stumbled over to Maomao and promptly collapsed on the ground. "The shop... It's all yours..." he managed, and then he was out cold.

Chou-u poked at him with a stick he'd gotten somewhere. "Stop that," the madam said, ordering a manservant to get Sazen out of the way.

"People were coming down with colds left, right, and center while you were away, Freckles. We used up the medicine you made before you left, but people kept begging us for more," Chou-u told Maomao.

She nodded: it made sense. People often got sick as the seasons changed, so there hadn't been enough medicine even though she'd made more than she had expected to need. Very few people in the pleasure district could afford to go to the doctor for proper treatment—taking some medicine was the most they could do. And a lot of them wouldn't even do that.

"Some of them were really pushy," Chou-u added. "One even *stole* some medicine, because he said he'd gotten it for free last year!"

Maomao's old man had probably given it to the guy—a bad habit of his. He would hand out treatments *gratis* to anyone who came weeping and crying, and once you'd given away medicine one time, everybody wanted it for free. No doubt he'd given the store's stocks away generously until the madam had noticed.

Maomao went into the apothecary's shop. She saw a mortar and pestle containing some half-made medicine, along with a medical book on the ground. She picked up the book and flipped the pages, which had smudges on them, as if Sazen had handled them with dirty fingers. Normally she might have given him a piece of her mind for failing to treat the book with proper respect, but when she saw him lolling there, she found she couldn't say anything.

I might just have gotten a lucky break with him, she thought. He wasn't very skilled, but he didn't just give up either. That was what really mattered.

Maomao went through the drawers of the medicine chest, tallying up which drugs needed to be replenished. Then she set

about cleaning up the messy floor.

It was humid in the shop. Time had passed while she was busy cleaning up from her time away, and it was now early summer. Rain fell continuously with no sign of letting up. A young man—the scion of an important merchant house—walked by with a prostitute Maomao knew, trotting along under an umbrella as if to illustrate that this season had its own charms. The woman probably hated getting her clothes all wet, but she wasn't going to miss this chance to go out. The courtesans' activities could be quite limited: the brothel was like a cage, and the courtesans were the little birds within it.

"You can almost hear the crickets in here," Meimei said with a resentful look at the woman outside. She was chewing on a dried potato with her luscious lips. The potatoes were quite tasty if you put them over some heat for a few minutes to soften them. They were sweet in their own way, not like one of those snacks that used sugar or honey.

"It was so hard on poor Sazen too," she added. Epidemics aside, Sazen might not have collapsed if Maomao's trip had been at a slightly different time of year. Sazen, who had a propensity to feel responsible at the strangest moments, had evidently begrudged himself even time to sleep in order to mix up enough medicinal herbs.

"You don't need to get some sleep, Sister?" Maomao asked. She was sure Meimei had been on the job the night before. The older woman had just gotten out of the bath, and her hair was still dripping. To sleep when it was time to sleep: that was part of a courtesan's job as well. Meanwhile, a high-class courtesan like Meimei had practice in the afternoons to keep her skills sharp.

Meimei, however, only munched lazily on the potato and looked at Maomao closely. "Listen—yesterday, my patron..."

"Yes?"

Meimei had three men who were her patrons, as Maomao recalled. One was a civil official, and the other two were merchants; all of them loved board games.

"He said I should come to his place," Meimei said. *Come to his place*: in other words, he wanted to take Meimei home with him. If he was talking like that, he wasn't just asking her to go for a little walk with him.

“He wants to buy you out?”

“That’s what it comes down to.”

For a courtesan, being bought out was akin to getting married. It was an opportunity to be freed from the cage of the brothel. Meimei, though, didn’t look happy about it. Maomao could understand: her taste in men was extraordinarily poor.

“He’s bad news, this customer?” Maomao asked.

“No, I wouldn’t say that.”

“Is the madam opposed?”

“Oh, she loves the idea.”

That might seem to make everything simple, but this decision would influence the rest of Meimei’s life. Maomao could well imagine she wouldn’t want to make it too lightly. It was not a choice that could be easily undone once it had been made.

Meimei was still a popular courtesan, but who knew how long that would last? Age was the unavoidable barrier for some in her line of work, and most women would have retired from the profession long ago.

“This guy, his wife has passed away, but he’s got kids,” Meimei explained.

“Hmm.” Maomao didn’t sound particularly interested. She hadn’t meant to respond so apathetically, but she’d suddenly found herself picturing the freak strategist. In the end, she’d given him an alcoholic drink to knock him out and then made her escape before he woke up. Lahan had come with her, keen to get back to the capital so he could coordinate about the potatoes. Rikuson had effectively drawn the short straw and had to stay behind. The strategist had been muttering in his sleep again about making a book, and at the moment he was probably ignoring all his work to focus on that task.

Maomao wondered if Meimei still had feelings for the likes of him. Did she know there was no longer a bought courtesan at his house? Maomao briefly wondered if she should tell her older sister about it—but the information seemed as likely to make Meimei’s life more difficult as easier, so she stayed quiet.

“Kids don’t tend to like me very much,” Meimei said.

“Can’t you just ignore them?” Maomao replied.

“Interesting idea...” For some reason, she seemed to be studying Maomao. She’d finished the potato and was wiping the grease from her fingers with a handkerchief. “Speaking of kids, where’s that

naughty tyke of yours?" she asked, attempting a change of subject.

"Chou-u? No idea. Probably with Ukyou or Sazen."

"Hm. There's something I'd like him to draw for me."

"Porno?"

Meimei grinned and gave Maomao an affectionate pinch of the cheek. Maomao regretted the question; she realized that sort of joke was more Pairin's thing.

"I thought for sure everyone would be sick of him by now, but his popularity seems surprisingly enduring," Maomao said, rubbing her reddened cheek. Chou-u had been doing booming business drawing portraits of the courtesans and menservants, but Maomao had assumed the interest was mainly driven by novelty.

"Sure. That boy, he's talented." Meimei ducked out of the apothecary's shop and went for the clerk's desk, where she picked up a folding fan. The bamboo frame was covered with quality paper and decorated with a picture of a cat playing with a ball. The animal was a calico—maybe Chou-u had taken Maomao for his model—and despite the paucity of lines used to depict it, the creature seemed startlingly alive.

Just at that moment—almost as if she knew what they were talking about—Maomao the cat came by; her tail stood up and she let out a "Meow!"

"When his portrait business started running out of steam, the boy began coming up with things like this," Meimei said. "He knew lots of courtesans like cats. I wondered why he was spending all his time following Maomao around—and then he came up with this!"

Maomao (the girl this time) didn't say anything. Chou-u certainly was thorough. And although the fan's frame was old, the paper was new. He'd refreshed it with stuff presumably sent from the quack's village. So the paper had been given to him, and he'd refurbished the frame—in other words, the materials had been free.

Maomao had to admit that Chou-u's drawing ability appeared to have improved substantially—maybe it just had to do with how quickly children grew and matured. She was sure that before, his drawings had been more superficial.

"Oh, that's right—the boy's learning from a painter, I think," Meimei said.

"That's news to me." Maomao frowned.

"You were away in the west for so long. A customer from a big merchant house brought this guy along—a cutting-edge painter, or

so he said."

"Ah," Maomao replied. It was a familiar story: rich people bought paintings or ceramics all the time; it was sort of a sport for them. When that wasn't enough, they would surround themselves with the artists who created works they particularly liked. It was an expensive hobby, one only the rich could indulge in.

"Believe it or not, he said he'd introduce the guy to Joka," Meimei added.

"Yikes!"

Joka was one of the "three princesses" of the Verdigris House, but she despised men. Civil officials or students might at least be able to talk to her about poetry or the civil examinations, but painting wasn't exactly her wheelhouse.

"That's not all," Meimei said. "This painter? It turns out he specializes in portraits of beautiful women." Her gloom of moments before was gone, replaced by a grin and excited, gossipy waves of the hand.

"I'm guessing our dear sister didn't take it well," Maomao said.

"Oh, no she didn't! She was *so* angry. And you know what she does when she gets angry—she writes poetry. Then some ignorant rookie courtesan copied one of Joka's poems exactly and sent it to a customer! There was a ruckus!"

Joka was a specialist at poems and lyrics—but one had to take care with anything she wrote in anger. The verses might look beautiful at first glance, but they were soaked with venom. She couldn't be allowed to write to customers when she was in a bad mood—the madam would make sure to check Joka's outgoing mail at moments like that.

While Pairin's appetite for men could make her hard to handle, Joka was at the other end of the scale, and was equally troublesome.

Maomao the cat wove around Meimei's legs and mewed for a treat. Meimei picked her up and put her on her knees, scratching her under the chin.

"So this is the painter Chou-u has been learning from?" Maomao (not the cat) asked.

"Uh-huh. Joka was hell-bent on sending that nasty letter, and she used Chou-u as her messenger."

Mr. Merchant, it seemed, desperately wanted Mr. Painter to create a picture of Joka. The intention had been for the man to do a

rough sketch when he met the courtesan, and then complete his final draft later. Nice and easy. But Joka wasn't about to sit there and let him study her. Instead, she conducted the entire meeting from behind a folding screen—rude, but effective.

Undeterred, Mr. Merchant and Mr. Painter had left their address and pleaded with Joka to get in touch with them. Normally, a letter would be delivered by an apprentice courtesan accompanied by a manservant, but a young girl couldn't be asked to deliver a missive of such vitriol, so Joka called for Chou-u instead. A neat way to skirt the madam's vetting process.

Chou-u delivered the letter—all well and good—but he also took a liking to Mr. Painter's pictures and started spending time with him.

"He might even be over there today," Meimei said.

"And after I warned him not to go out," Maomao grumbled. She wished everyone else would think about what watching out for Chou-u meant. He still dragged one leg—if anything happened to him, he would be hard-pressed to react.

"Heeey! Maomao!" she heard Ukyou call.

Maomao stood up, ignoring the cat, who had rolled over on her back and was begging for food. "What's wrong?" she called back. Ukyou looked distressed.

"It's Chou-u!"

"What's he done this time?" Maomao scowled, looking as if she was not at all surprised by this development.

"Please—just come with me," Ukyou said, taking her hand. "Some friend of his is dying!"

Chapter 10: The Bad Dumplings

Ukyou brought Maomao to a mansion in the middle of the city. In the capital, the farther north you went, the better public safety was, and that was where most of the middle-class houses were located.

One of the houses looked more weathered than the others. It must have once been resplendent in its own way, but now some of the roof tiles were missing, and the clay wall had given way in places, revealing the bamboo frame underneath. It looked less like age and more like that the owner didn't keep up with maintenance.

"Here, this is it." Ukyou knocked on the door of the tumbledown house. "Sorry, but this is as far as I can go. I'll catch hell from the madam if I don't get back," he said.

"Yeah, I understand," Maomao said, but when she went into the dilapidated house, it was with a look of some curiosity. Ukyou certainly seemed to be a busy man. "What's this?" she wondered aloud as she entered. Despite the battered state of the house's exterior, inside it was remarkably neat and tidy.

That wasn't what surprised her, though. Instead it was the walls. They were painted white and covered in stucco, on which pictures had been painted. A peach garden spread across one entire wall—but it wasn't three heroic warriors biting into the peaches, but a beautiful woman. She was shaped a bit like a peach herself, her hair was pitch-black, and white teeth peeked out from between lips that looked as luscious as the fruit she was eating.

She was the very essence of the peach-village immortal.

That's the sort of thing you only have time to do if you've got a patron, Maomao thought. Meimei had said the man did paintings of beautiful women, but Maomao had never imagined something so spectacular. She studied the wall closely—the painted surfaces had a unique sheen to them, not like the paintings she was used to. She was just about to run a finger along the wall in hopes of figuring out what the material was when she heard pounding footsteps.

"Freckles! Hey, Freckles! What are you standing around for?

Come look at him, quick!" It was Chou-u, his face pale.

Shit, that's right. Maomao did have a bad habit of becoming completely engaged in whatever had her attention. She allowed Chou-u to drag her through the house, until they reached what looked like a living room. It was littered with various and sundry objects, though: colorful powders (probably pigments), eggshells (for some reason), a white dust that she took to be stucco, and another substance for thickening it.

Right in the middle of the room, a man lay on a couch. Another man with a worried expression was beside him. The man on the couch was haggard and lacked facial hair, and his pallor had gone beyond pale; he was practically white. The only color in his skin seemed to be on his fingertips, which were covered in paint. The man standing beside him looked fastidious, except that his hands, too, were dirty.

"You have to look at the master!" Chou-u said.

The "master" must be the famous progressive artist. There was a bucket full of vomit beside the couch.

Maomao began to examine the man. His arms and legs twitched occasionally. She opened his eyes and looked at his pupils; she took his pulse. As far as she could tell, he showed every sign of having a case of food poisoning.

"What are his symptoms?" she asked.

"I guess he was throwing up and having diarrhea for a long time," Chou-u said.

"When it finally subsided, he seemed to be suffering with the chill, so I laid him down," added the man standing nearby.

"And who's this?" Maomao asked.

"He's the master's work friend! Come on, hurry it up!"

Chou-u could browbeat her all he wanted, but there was only so much Maomao could do. If you didn't know what toxin was at work, you couldn't treat it. If it was true the man had been vomiting and having diarrhea, though, there was one thing he would certainly be lacking.

"Chou-u, get me some salt and sugar. If there's none in the house, get some from somewhere else," Maomao said. She pulled a coin pouch out of the folds of her robe and tossed it at him.

"Got it," he said and scurried out of the room. He might not be able to run well because of his half-paralyzed body, but he could be trusted with this much of an errand, at least.

“I’m going to use the kitchen,” Maomao told the work friend, who nodded.

She went to the kitchen and looked in the water jug to make sure the water was still good. She would have preferred to boil it, but there wasn’t time. “Is this fresh water?” she asked.

“It was purchased from the drinking-water vendor just yesterday, so it should be all right,” the man said. Yes, if they’d bought the water, then it should be safe. The same might not hold in the rougher parts of town, but around here, it was unlikely anyone would sell something adulterated. Maomao thought they could more or less safely rule out the possibility that the artist had drunk contaminated water. She took a scooperful, sniffed it, then sipped, but as far as she could tell, it smelled and tasted normal. The house might not look like much, but at least they could afford decent water.

“Do you have any idea what might have happened?” Maomao asked the fastidious man.

“I think so,” he said. Despite his distress, he had enough presence of mind—and enough courtesy—to offer her a chair. He sat on a barrel instead. “He’s more than happy to eat spoiled food—it’s a bad habit of his. I suspect that’s the problem here.”

Food poisoning, then, as Maomao had thought.

“He found some stuffed dumplings that he ate. They tasted spoiled, so *we* spit them out right away, but *he* swore up and down that they would be fine if we cooked them, and he ate them up.”

“Who’s ‘we’?”

“Ah, the kid was with us.”’

The kid? That must have been what they called Chou-u.

Bad food didn’t magically become good again just because you cooked it a little more. The poisonous element of the spoilage often remained. A moldy dumpling, for example, could still be toxic even if you scraped the mold off. Not many people worried about it, though. Sometimes they didn’t have the luxury to worry about a touch of poison, when they were facing a choice between eating bad food and not eating at all.

“Argh! What am I going to do? Even if he gets back to work on the painting, it won’t be done in time.” The man brushed his fingers across a large board resting against one wall. It was painted white and bore a sketch, a faint outline of a woman. No doubt the next step would be to color her in, the picture growing ever more lifelike

as the colors became more vivid. “He promised it would be done ten days from now!”

Ten days? So there was some sort of deadline involved.

“I’m back!” Chou-u said, coming in with sugar and salt, which he handed to Maomao. She put them in the water she’d prepared, mixing them in, then taking some cotton she had with her and dipping it in the water. She let the water drip from the cloth into the man’s mouth, administering fluid several times.

She was torn about whether to keep him warm or induce a fever. If nothing else, the filthy clothes he was wearing now wouldn’t be able to absorb his sweat. She had them change the artist into a cotton overgarment that could soak up the perspiration. It couldn’t be doing him much good lying on a couch either; she got a proper bed ready and then set about preparing stomach medicine.

The man vomited two more times while she was doing all this, but there wasn’t much to bring up; only the acrid smell of stomach acid pervaded the room.

Maybe keeping the sweat off him and giving him liquids was having an effect, because by nighttime he seemed calmer and his spasming had stopped. Maomao, Chou-u, and the man’s partner were all exhausted. There was nothing in this house except painting supplies, and even getting the bedroom in a usable state had required asking for help from the neighbors. The mattress had been as hard as an old rice cracker and just as moldy. What kind of life had this man been living?

Maomao and Chou-u were each slumped in a chair. The couch on which the master of the house had been lying was now open, but quite honestly, nobody was interested in using it until it had been thoroughly cleaned.

“You think he’ll make it, Freckles?” Chou-u asked, concern in his voice.

“Probably,” she said. It was impossible to be certain, but assuming nothing unexpected happened, she thought the man would regain consciousness. They would have to try to keep him still for a while, and give him food that would aid his digestion. The house didn’t even have enough rice to make thin rice gruel, though; they would have to go and get some. For that matter, there weren’t any decent pots to cook in either.

Adroitly reading the situation, the other man said, “I’ll go get some rice and a clay pot from my place.” It couldn’t have been easy;

he was tired too. Was he that close to the man who owned this house?

"What does our patient usually eat, anyway?" Maomao mumbled.

She was sort of talking to herself, but Chou-u answered, "The master always buys stuff from street stalls, or sometimes the neighbors give him food. Today it was those dumplings."

"That explains the state he's in," Maomao said, provoking a look of disgust from Chou-u. "What?"

"Nothing. Just thinking about that stuff we ate today. The other guy and I both shared the dumplings with the master, but they were so disgusting, we spat them out. I thought they were weird before I tasted them, though."

One thing that was strange about them, for example, was the way the master had said "I don't remember seeing these around here" when he saw the dumplings on the table. That might seem like a red flag, but the artist had nonetheless offered them to his guests.

"I guess I appreciate that he was trying to be hospitable and all, but I feel like there's a lot of stuff around here that maybe he shouldn't be eating." Chou-u sounded unimpressed. One always heard that there were plenty of weirdos among artists, and it seemed to be true.

Maomao leaned her elbows on the armrest and put her chin in her hands. "I'm surprised you were even able to put something like that in your mouth."

"I mean, the other guy said he would eat one too, and they did *look* good."

The other guy; in other words, the work friend from earlier. Chou-u was always hungry, so he was apt to eat anything that seemed remotely edible. It was enough to make one wonder if he had ever really been the son of a fancy household.

"But it was so *bitter*! I think maybe the bean filling had gone bad or something," he said.

"Bitter?" Maomao asked.

"Yeah, just awful! I was like, *ugh!* and spat it out. So did the other guy."

So it looked fine, but it tasted bitter? Maomao crossed her arms and cocked her head. "Was it really bitter? Not more like sour?"

"Yeah, it was bitter. 'Sour' isn't the word I would use."

“And the filling didn’t smell funny at all?”

“If it had, I probably wouldn’t have eaten it.” Chou-u had taken off his shoes and was kicking his feet. They had the window open to change the air in the room, and it had gotten humid inside. Night had fallen; Maomao found a lamp lying around and lit it. It was an unusual-looking light—from his paints to his sources of illumination, this artist seemed to like imported stuff—but it burned fish oil, so Maomao was used to the smell. (In fact, Maomao the cat had started lapping up the oil recently; it was proving quite a problem.)

“Did the filling have any threadlike things? Anything stuck to it?”

“Stuck to it? Well, now that you mention it...” Chou-u seemed to have thought of something. “I guess it might have seemed a little slimy. I spat it out so fast that I’m not sure. The other guy said it was rotten and to spit it out. We washed our mouths with water and didn’t swallow any of it.”

Maomao was perplexed.

“But I don’t think those dumplings would’ve tasted better just ’cause you cooked them. I wonder if there’s something wrong with the master’s tongue.” Chou-u looked at the sleeping man with real exasperation.

Something wrong with his tongue, Maomao thought. She was beginning to see a light at the end of this tunnel. “What did you do with your leftovers, then?” she asked.

“Threw them away! They’re in the trash bin outside. The master was all upset about us wasting food, but at least he didn’t go try to take them out of the trash.”

No sooner had Maomao heard that than she grabbed the lamp and went outside, where she located the wooden box for the trash. A disgusting odor emanated from it—the garbage was still inside. Right on top were two half-eaten dumplings. Maomao was glad she’d made it before the men came to take the trash away to be slop for pigs.

“Yikes! What are you doing? That’s gross!” Chou-u said when he saw her digging through the garbage. But Maomao had no compunctions about picking up a mangled dumpling with her bare hands. She looked at the filling and discovered minced pork and several kinds of vegetable. She pulled the dumpling apart, trying to figure out exactly what was inside.

Chou-u watched her. “Freckles... Please stop grinning while you paw through raw garbage. It’s super scary.”

A smile must have come over her face without her even realizing it. If she was smiling, it was from excitement—she couldn’t ignore the rush.

“Is this what your master or whoever cooked and ate?”

“Yeah. I guarantee he’s got no sense of taste or something. It tasted *awful*, but he kept saying how delicious it was.”

A hypothesis was beginning to solidify in Maomao’s mind. “What about that other guy? What did he come here for today?”

“Probably to stop the master, I guess. The master swore that when he finished the job he was doing, he was going to leave on a trip immediately.” Chou-u looked down, dejected.

“What kind of trip?”

“Well, he said he studied painting in the west once, way back when. He saw this beautiful woman there and he never forgot her. That’s why he only ever paints pictures of women, he says.”

The west? It reminded her of the lamp, the paints—everything had had a strong whiff of the exotic about it.

“The other guy keeps trying to tell him that there’s no way a woman he saw decades ago is still around, but he’s desperate to find her again.”

The flow of time was not merciful; no matter how beautiful, no woman could ward off the effects of age. Even a lady who once wept tears of pearl could end up as a withered, greedy old hag. If there were such a thing as a woman who didn’t age, she would have to be an immortal or a faerie or something.

“Wh-What in the world are you doing?”

Ah, speak of the devil: the “other guy” had returned with rice and a pot. He was so shocked that he dropped the pot and came running over.

In the darkness, covered in garbage, Maomao must have looked a fright. She still hadn’t wiped the unsettling grin off her face either. Even she found it weird to be smiling so hard—but she couldn’t stop. Instead she grinned at the man, clutching handfuls of trash in both hands. Then she looked at Chou-u.

“Chou-u, you can go home. One of the menservants should be coming for you soon.” She assumed Ukyou, thoughtful as he was, would show up to see what was going on now that the sun had gone down. He could ask someone to cover for him at work.

“What? No way I’m leaving yet!”

“You’ve got to be tired. At least go to sleep until someone comes to get you.”

“Yeah, well... Wash your hands, Freckles.” He had no real comeback, meaning he *was* tired. He yawned and went inside.

“Honestly... What are you doing?” the painter’s partner asked again, watching Maomao from a safe distance. He was looking at the garbage in her hands.

“Could I talk to you for a few minutes? I’ll wash my hands first.” Maomao put down the garbage and headed for the well.

Maomao and the man were sitting in the kitchen again, Chou-u and the master asleep in the next room. They spoke quietly so as not to wake them.

“What was it you wanted to talk about?” the man asked.

“Do you know much about poisonous mushrooms?” Maomao said.

“I can’t say I thought that’s where this discussion was going,” the man said, but he wouldn’t quite look at her.

A few things about this case had struck Maomao as unusual. For one, you’d expect something rotten to taste sour. Sure, some things might turn bitter when they went bad, but a bitter flavor wasn’t enough to be certain you were dealing with rotten food. And if the taste was bad enough to cause the other two to spit it out, why hadn’t it bothered the old master?

Then there was the question of where the dumplings had even come from.

“Did you know that there are certain mushrooms that are bitter when raw, but that the unpleasant flavor goes away when they’re cooked? What’s more, those mushrooms are poisonous—they’re often behind cases of food poisoning at this time of year.”

This particular mushroom was frequently mistaken for an edible variety used in cooking. The surface was slightly slimy, which would fit with Chou-u’s description, as well as the mushrooms Maomao had observed in the filling of the dumplings in the trash.

If they’d gotten the food from a street stall or something, there might have been a public outcry about it—but in any case, nobody would go on eating something that tasted truly terrible.

Had they gotten the food from someone in the neighborhood? But there hadn’t been any talk of people getting upset stomachs—

someone would have told them if there were.

Neither the street stall nor the neighborhood explanations seemed very likely.

"May I ask who brought the dumplings?" Maomao said. She looked at the paintings of beautiful women that seemed to adorn every wall. Each looked like a gorgeous female immortal, and each had distinctive, individual characteristics, suggesting the artist had used a different model for each one.

The deadline for the work the artist was doing now was drawing near, and when it was over, the master had claimed he would leave for the west. This man here had been trying to stop him. He claimed to be a colleague, but there was nothing about him that really said *artist*.

"What are you trying to say? It was just food poisoning," the man said.

"Yes, it certainly was that. Food poisoning caused by some mushrooms."

The dumplings weren't actually rotten—but they were poisoned, and had been from the start.

"Why did you do it?" Maomao asked. "Why did you put poison in the dumplings? Why were you so desperate to make it look like an accident that you even got Chou-u involved?"

"I d-don't know what you're talking about."

"I don't get the impression you intended to kill him," Maomao said, and the man didn't respond. "If anything, I think you sincerely *don't* want him to die. Am I wrong?"

The man was silent for a moment, then he closed his eyes and let out a long sigh. "The poison proved more potent than I'd expected." This man was the straightforward type—this seemed as good as a confession. "I was wrong to bring the kid into this, but if it saved him, then I'm glad I did it."

Maomao didn't know what she would have done had the man turned out to be the violent type. But he stayed calm; more than anything, he sounded worried about the old painter. On his face was a combination of relief and regret.

"I see how glad you are that he's all right. Why poison him in the first place, then?" Maomao asked.

"Because he was leaving! He wouldn't shut up about his *trip* to the west, but he doesn't mean to come back!"

"He was moving there permanently?"

“Yeah. He’s consumed with the idea…again.”

The man got up from his seat and went into the next room. He gazed lovingly at the assembled paintings, then went to another room deeper into the house. This room, too, had walls covered in pictures of beautiful women.

“These paintings are stunning,” Maomao said, squinting at them. It occurred to her that if a certain elegant beauty had been there, he could practically have blended right in. (An irrelevant thought if there ever was one!) He was probably stuck under an avalanche of work at the palace by now. “I hear there are even merchants who want to collect his work. If he were to take commissions, he could probably make a comfortable living.”

“Yes, but he can’t send the painting out until it’s finished.”

“And this westward journey of his, he talked to you about it?”

“Yes, but he insisted it was just a trip. I guess he felt he had to lie even to me. It must be a lie—otherwise, why would it have taken him the past six months to get ready?”

This man had just wanted to give the artist a bout of food poisoning—a reason to postpone his deadline. Maomao, having been all but dragged to the western capital, understood that any venture even farther west would require substantial preparations. Proof of identification to get you across the border, a caravan to take you. If you missed your opportunity, you’d practically have to start over from square one. That was what this man had been hoping would happen.

“Argh… This is awful. I thought he really might die.” The man put his head in his hands and mumbled, “Please don’t die…” He was genuinely, deeply worried.

“Couldn’t you have used a milder poison?” Maomao asked, although she realized it might sound odd to speak of any poison as being mild.

“No—he’s got an iron stomach and a constitution to match,” the man said. It was that indefatigable stomach that had convinced the artist that anything could be eaten if cooked properly—and which had convinced this man that only a good, strong poison would do the job.

That’s why he had needed Chou-u, to make it look like it really was food poisoning. With a third party to testify that the dumplings were spoiled, nobody would suspect anything else when the painter got sick to his stomach.

Maomao could hardly believe this. “Why didn’t you just *talk* to him, then?”

“I did! More than once. At first he didn’t even tell me about his plan at all.”

Eventually, though, the artist had hit trouble trying to arrange everything he needed for his trip, and had turned to this man for help. Even then, he’d stayed quiet about his intention to relocate.

This man had claimed to be a painter, but really he was just an assistant on the master’s work. He would mix paints, purchase pigments, and find merchants who wished to acquire the master’s paintings.

“I’m hardly more than a gofer. Without the master, I’m not capable of doing anything!”

“Do you really believe that?” Maomao asked.

The master was certainly a gifted painter, but as a human being he seemed to be missing something—and people like that tended to end up dead in a field somewhere before long. They needed assistants like this.

“I’ve learned things from talking to so many merchants, though, and I tried to tell him about them,” the man said. He’d heard that strange things were happening in the west—that they were still only foreshocks, but if the rumors were true, it would be best to keep their heads down for the time being. “But he insisted that if that were the case, he had to go—that it was now or never.”

Instead of being dissuaded from going west, the master had redoubled his preparations. He’d already met with the leader of a caravan, so there was no way for this man to intervene from that direction.

In the dark room was a large canvas covered with a white sheet.

“He’d given up on the idea of going before—but then he saw this beautiful lady, and it inspired his passions anew.” The man pulled the cloth aside.

Maomao’s eyes went wide. “But this is...”

“A woman much like the immortal he encountered in the west, he says. This isn’t her, but she looked so much like the other woman that the memories came flooding back to him. I guess I don’t blame him. How could you forget someone like this?”

That’s *what this is about?* Maomao thought, cold sweat running down her neck.

“The master said she was a shrine maiden he’d seen in Shaoh,” the man explained.

The painting depicted a woman with white hair and red eyes.

Chapter 11: The Dancing Water Sprite

What am I even doing this for? Maomao asked herself, pouting as she prepared the cloth-wrapped package. It was the sort of thing she used when purchasing medicinal herbs. She didn't grow and harvest everything herself, after all. Sometimes she turned to a specialist, the same way one would get one's mochi from a place that made nothing but pounded rice cakes.

Maomao looked for Sazen, and found him listlessly sweeping the foyer of the Verdigris House. He'd slept for several days straight after Maomao had gotten home, but as he started to look healthier, the madam began to work him harder again, and meanwhile Maomao was making him study apothecary's work in his spare time.

"Could you watch the shop for me? I'm just going to the next village; I'll be back this evening," she said, leaning out the window.

Sazen flinched and rested his chin on the end of the broom. "You mean it? And is watching the shop *all* I have to do?" Under Maomao's relentless tutelage, Sazen had become a pretty competent worker, but it seemed he was still leery of having to take over for very long.

"Take down any of the herbs hanging from the ceiling that have dried and powder them. Preserve them just like we always do."

"Yeah, sure thing." Sazen leaned the broom against the wall, then reached under his shirt and scratched his belly, which Maomao rewarded with a glower. She could see the dirt getting underneath his fingernails.

"And make sure you wash your hands," she added.

"Don't have to tell me twice."

"Under your fingernails too!"

Yes, Sazen was a quick study, but he could do with a little more interest in hygiene. Plenty of their customers would complain if he wasn't. Maomao would have to keep reminding him.

I wonder if I'm still in time for the shared carriage, she thought. Renting a carriage all for oneself was expensive. Carriages came to

the capital several times per day to deliver provisions, though, and since they unloaded their cargo here, they had room to serve as shared rides on the return journey. It took time and was about the most uncomfortable way to travel, but it had one unquestionable advantage: it was cheap.

"You going somewhere, Freckles?" Chou-u asked, revealing front teeth that were starting to grow back in. His loyal henchman Zulin was beside him. Maomao gave them both a sour look, then pushed past the children and out of the apothecary shop. "Hey, you *are* going somewhere, aren't you?" Chou-u called after her. "Is it the market? If you're going shopping, I wanna go too!"

He grabbed Maomao the cat, who had been sleeping in the foyer, and used her paw to poke Maomao the human in a *Take-me, take-me* gesture. "Nrah!" the cat objected.

"I'm going to the woods," Maomao finally said. "It's a boring spot in the middle of nowhere."

"The woods! I wanna go to the woods! Take me! Take me! Take me!" The cat's poking became a veritable slapping. The feline Maomao was no happier about this than the human one, kicking her legs until she freed herself from Chou-u's grasp.

Instead, Chou-u flung himself on the ground. Maomao would have thought a kid would be over throwing tantrums like that at ten years old, but maybe his pampered upbringing had left him behind on maturity. He seemed ahead of his years in some ways; Maomao could only rue that this wasn't one of them. Zulin was preparing to imitate her "boss," but Maomao grabbed her by the collar and stood her up straight before she could make it to the ground.

"I'll report you to the madam," Maomao warned her, at which point Zulin froze and shook her head vigorously. Evidently her heart hadn't been in the tantrum; she'd just been following Chou-u.

"What's all the racket out here?" The madam appeared, looking tired. Zulin flinched.

"I'm going to go get some herbs. *He* would only get in my way, and you know it." She pointed at Chou-u, who was still rolling on the floor.

The madam squinted at Chou-u, then let out an exasperated sigh and said, "Oh, take him, already."

"*What?*" Maomao asked, her unhappiness written on her face. She'd been sure that the madam, an eminently practical woman,

would see that there was no reason to bring a troublesome brat on a work trip.

"What? No way! You mean it, Gramma?" Chou-u sprang triumphantly to his feet.

Zulin started to bounce up and down in imitation, but the madam held her down with a hand on her head. "Not you." Zulin's head drooped in disappointment. Unlike Chou-u, who seemed to cop special treatment at every turn, she was an apprentice. If she were to be allowed to go with Maomao and Chou-u, it would set a bad example for the other trainees. Zulin had been essentially a bonus who came with her older sister, but if she didn't prove eventually that she could do something to make money, she would certainly be shunted directly into courtesan's work.

Chou-u patted his despondent lackey on the back. "Don't worry, I'll be sure to bring you a souvenir!"

"And who's going to pay for this souvenir?" Maomao interjected immediately.

Chou-u ignored her, instead continuing to Zulin, "You'll be able to go outside one day. Just hang in there—I'll buy you out eventually!"

Maomao almost choked. Where had he learned to talk like that? And did he know that most of the customers who said that sort of thing were shiftless good-for-nothings?

The madam, ignoring the jabbering kid, nudged Maomao.

"And why am I taking him, exactly?" Maomao growled at her.

The madam stuck her hand into her collar and scratched her collarbone. "You were gone for an age there. You know how Chou-u was acting while you were away?"

Well, of course she didn't. Probably shouting and playing, like he always did. He was pretty close to Ukyou the manservant; he could get along fine without Maomao.

"Believe it or not, he was depressed," the madam said. "Think about it. The boy comes here with no parents, and then even you leave him. Anyone would be upset."

"Not what I expected to hear from a monster of an old lady who would gladly buy a little girl from a procurer," Maomao replied, the sarcasm thick in her voice. Until Luomen had adopted her, she'd been left alone in a room, ignored no matter how hard she cried. And when the infant Maomao had realized that crying never got her anywhere, she had ceased to do it. It might have been one reason

her emotional expression seemed so subdued.

She didn't specifically resent anyone for that; for that matter, she didn't personally remember it. The woman who had borne her had work to do, as did Pairin, who'd been the one to give her milk. At the time, the Verdigris House had been on the edge of collapse, and Maomao had been the object of some anger. She considered herself lucky no one had simply strangled her.

"If they're being sold by a procurer, then their fate is already decided. It's their parents' karma, and not my problem. But I raise them and educate them so they can do useful work—don't you think that's awfully kind of me? Remember, if they grow up to be dumbasses who can't do anything, they're not going to stay here."

"And what about Chou-u?"

"Figuring out what to do with him is your business. I'm just keeping an eye on him to make sure he doesn't die. I do get paid for my trouble, after all."

Uh-huh. Maomao wondered solemnly exactly how much the madam was getting out of this.

"As for your transportation, you can skip the shared carriage. I'll arrange one for you. You should be grateful," the madam said.

"Gee, awfully generous of you. I'm not paying fare, you know."

"It'll help cover the potatoes," the madam replied, then headed for the menservants' room. Maomao watched her go, tilting her head in puzzlement.

I really don't want to take him, she thought. She was heading for a place the man last night had described to her. Maomao had gotten him to tell her what he knew about the woman in the picture—where Chou-u's "master" had seen this woman with white hair and red eyes. She was curious, too, about the story of the painter's encounter with another such woman in Shaoh all those years ago, but for now she had other things on her mind.

It was more than six months ago that the painter had seen the woman in a village where he went to get pigments. He claimed she truly looked like an immortal.

"He said she danced on the water," the man had told Maomao. The scene was so uncanny that the painter thought he must have dreamed it, in part because he'd wound up at the lake while thoroughly drunk. He collected his pigments, but by then it was late, so he had stayed the night at the village. Before he knew it, it was morning, and he was sleeping in a nearby shed.

By then, the master felt sure this was no dream. It reminded him of the woman he had seen long ago, and he seemed to take it as some sort of sign. That was when his ridiculous talk of moving west had started.

Maomao knew the village the painter had gone to; she'd been there several times to purchase medicine. The perfect excuse for her to go there again. She gave the bubbling Chou-u one more glare and sighed.

After an hour bouncing and rattling along in the carriage, they arrived at a village near a forest. It stood along a river and reminded her in spirit of the quack's hometown. It mainly produced rice and vegetables, and the freshly planted paddies reflected the sky like giant mirrors.

"Wow!" Chou-u exclaimed, leaning out of the carriage and watching the scenery go by. This wasn't one of those fancy carriages like the nobility rode in; it was more of a wagon—there were no curtains and no coverings; there were even raincoats stashed on board in case it started raining.

"Careful, Chou-u, don't lean too far. Don't come crying to me if you fall out," called Ukyou, who was sitting on the driver's bench. The madam had been as good as her word—she'd rented a carriage, but she'd stuck Ukyou with driving it.

What's the story here? Maomao wondered, looking at Ukyou with some annoyance. It wasn't that she had any specific beef with the thoughtful chief manservant, but something kept nagging at her as she watched the fields roll by. The paddies were indeed stunning at this time of year. The sky was blue with no hint of rain. The land looked as sapphire as the sky, and there was something mysterious and intriguing about the blue-clad world.

Chou-u tugged on Maomao's sleeve. "Hey, Freckles. What's that?"

He pointed to a couple of small hills of sand; in each stood a stick connected to each other by a braid of twisted rope. They appeared to stand by the path of the river that ran alongside the rice paddies.

"I think it's intended to mark off sacred space," Maomao said. She didn't know much about it herself, but she knew it had something to do with some sort of folk religion. It was supposed to create a barrier to keep bad things out. The shape of the rope was a

little unusual, though—maybe a local variation on the superstition.

Then, though, Maomao leaned out herself to get a better look. *Huh?* The rope really didn't look anything like the other times she'd seen them. She thought they used to be simpler—but this year the rope was more twisted than usual, and strips of white paper had been woven into it. It struck her as a bit more sophisticated than before, but she also knew you didn't just go changing the shape of cultic objects on a whim.

"We're here," Ukyou said. Maomao hopped off the carriage and looked into the woods. "I'll hang around the village," Ukyou informed them, pointing to what appeared to be the only place in town for some refreshment. They probably at least had some moonshine on hand. "What do you want to do, Chou-u?"

"Hmm..." Chou-u glanced back and forth between Maomao and Ukyou, then trotted over to Maomao.

Ukyou chuckled. "Think I'll go knock back a round, then." He headed for the drinking establishment.

Chou-u was clutching Maomao's robe for some reason. She was afraid he would pull her belt clean off, so she took his hand instead and pulled him toward the village chief's house.

"This place sure is empty," Chou-u said after a quiet moment. It was true—there was really nothing there—but there was also no need to say so out loud, and Maomao gave him a rap on the head.

They headed for the last house in the village, a tumbledown place with vegetables dangling from the eaves. They were probably drying them out to preserve them—a fine idea, but at this time of year, you had to be careful or mold would start growing on the vegetables before you knew it. Next to the vegetables was a braided rope, like a smaller version of the one they had seen earlier.

Maomao figured it had been three years since she'd been here last. Her service in the rear palace had kept her away for a long time, and she hoped the village chief still remembered her.

"Hello?" she called, knocking on the door. Chou-u imitated her with a solid *thump*, and Maomao shoved down his head angrily, just as a young woman emerged from inside.

"Yes? Who is it?" the woman said. She was quite pretty for someone so far out in the country, and she was dressed in an outfit that looked plain but durable.

"I'd like to see the chief, if I may. Tell him the disciple of Luomen the apothecary is here," Maomao said, identifying herself

not by her own name, but by her father's. Most people would hardly believe her if she claimed to be an apothecary. Getting a few years older might help with that, but Maomao felt she had no reason to boast of being an apothecary, so she stuck with a name the chief was more likely to recognize.

The young woman called into the house and a middle-aged man emerged—the chief's son, as Maomao remembered. He must have remembered her too, for he said, "Ah, yes," and nodded. "I'm afraid my father caught a severe cold last year..."

And had died of it, sadly.

"I see," Maomao said. Far be it from her to ridicule him, to say it was only a cold. Left unchecked, a cold could quickly get worse and become pneumonia. Her recollection was that the former village chief never took medicine—he was a gregarious personality who was fond of saying that anything could be cured with a good drink and a good sleep. His philosophy had made him a bad customer, but Maomao nonetheless had never disliked him.

"I insisted he should see a doctor, but—well, it's a moot point now," the son said. Then: "Sorry. That's enough sentiment. You're here to go into the woods?"

"Yes, sir." Maomao gave him the amount she always paid, but he shook his head.

"Keep it. You'd better get in there before the sun goes down."

"I'm certainly grateful, sir..." Maomao couldn't help wondering, though, what had inspired this change of heart.

She was about to put the coins back in the folds of her robe, but Chou-u stuck out his hand. "Freckles! You should use that to buy me candy instead! C'mon, do it!"

"You've got your own income," she said, stashing the coins safely where they belonged and turning toward the forest.

"Lots of snakes this time of year. Be careful," the new chief said.

"Of course, I know that. And they make excellent ingredients."

"Not these snakes," the chief replied, pinching the rope that dangled from the eaves between his fingers. When Maomao looked closer, she saw that each end of the rope was shaped a little differently. It narrowed at one end, while at the other it got thicker and the end was split. It almost reminded her of a snake. In fact, it looked very familiar. "If you kill a snake, the villagers might attack you," the chief said.

“Attack me? What in the world for?” The idea was virtually incomprehensible to Maomao, whose first thought on seeing a snake was usually how tasty it would be grilled up with a nice soy sauce glaze. For that matter, once before when she had captured several snakes here, they’d actually thanked her for taking care of the pests.

The new chief gave her a tired smile. “It was my father’s last will, you see. Just before he died, when he was very weak, he summoned a shaman.”

He should’ve just called a doctor!

This shaman had given the former chief an incense that would ease his pain, but in exchange he was instructed to disseminate a teaching in the village. That, Maomao realized, was where the unusual “sacred” ropes must have come from.

“See, long ago, a snake god used to be worshipped around here. That was the reasoning,” the current chief said, still smiling sheepishly. His expression suggested that you couldn’t argue with an old faith, but his smile was strained.

“What do you do with the venomous snakes, then?” Maomao asked. Vipers were the farmer’s natural enemy. If one of them bit a person, they were all but done for.

Still smiling that strained smile, the chief whispered, “I’ve been killing them, secretly. I know some of the faithful wouldn’t approve, but what am I supposed to do?” The chief had appearances to maintain. The young woman, probably his wife, was eyeballing the visitors. It couldn’t feel good to watch her husband have a private conversation right in front of her.

Maomao had the permission she wanted, though, so she had no further business here. She decided it was time to make herself scarce.

“Come on, let’s go,” she said.

“Yep!” Chou-u said.

“Ah, there’s one more thing you should know,” the chief said. “It’s not just snakes—apparently, birds are off-limits too. Not that you could probably catch one without a bow and arrow.”

“This shaman sounds pretty demanding. You couldn’t even slaughter a chicken with a rule like that.”

“The prohibition is only on flying birds.”

Maomao spread her hands and shrugged—it made no sense to her. Instead she headed for the woods, with Chou-u right behind

her.

"Aren't you done yet, Freckles?" Chou-u asked, sitting on a stump with his legs dangling.

This is why I didn't want him here.

Brats like him got bored so quickly. The trip over was all well and good, but it had been obvious that Chou-u would be dead weight sooner rather than later. Maomao felt sure that the old lady had forced her to take him with her so the little rat wouldn't get in the way of the menservants doing their work. Lonely, her ass!

Maomao ignored Chou-u's chattering, instead clipping some grass growing by the root of a tree—these were unusual, and she couldn't resist grabbing them. She only needed the fresh buds, but she would worry about the details later.

"Heeey! Freckles!"

"Pipe down. You're the one who wanted to tag along," Maomao said as she shoved some herbs into her bag.

Chou-u braced himself on his hands and leaned forward, looking at Maomao in annoyance. "But I'm tired!"

They hadn't walked far, but with the overgrown grass and fallen leaves, the footing was difficult. It would be fatiguing for Chou-u, who was still partially paralyzed. Fair enough—but Maomao wasn't about to cut him any slack for it. If she took it easy on him now, he would expect her to do it all the time.

"Just wait there, then," she said. "I'm going farther in."

"What? No way!" Chou-u let his mouth hang open to show his annoyance. "You're just gonna leave me here?"

"You said you were tired."

"Ukyou would give me a piggyback ride!"

"Sorry, but you're too heavy for me. See you." Maomao promptly started off. Chou-u grimaced, then jumped down off his stump. He did prefer to be with people, like the madam described. When he was in the pleasure district, he could frequently be found with the menservants or the girl children.

The forest was gloomy on account of the dense growth, and he heard a fluttering sound like flapping wings. It was accompanied by a *hoo, hoo*—maybe it was a pigeon?

"I'm coming! I'm coming, already, just don't leave me here!" Chou-u called, and started after Maomao, dragging his leg. Maomao, keeping one cold eye on him, continued into the woods.

The place was full of different trees. Many were broadleafs; the place must be rife with nuts and berries in the fall. Conifer forests were better for making paper, but in Li, most such places were located in the north.

As she went along, Maomao spotted a raspberry and popped it in her mouth. Chou-u found another and copied her, which was fine, except that it left his mouth sticky and red. Maomao swallowed her annoyance and wiped his lips, knowing that if he wiped them on his sleeve, the color would never come out.

With each raspberry he ate, Chou-u smiled ruefully. “These are sour,” he announced.

“That’s because they’re not ripe yet,” Maomao said.

It evidently wasn’t going to stop him from eating them. “Hey, Freckles! Can you eat these mushrooms?” he asked, pointing to some small fungi growing on a desiccated tree trunk. “Are they, like, eat-able?”

“They’re not very good, I’m afraid. And they’re not even poisonous.” In other words, they were of no interest to Maomao. Chou-u’s shoulders slumped disappointedly.

They sounded lighthearted, but Maomao hadn’t forgotten why she was here. Eventually she found a marsh (along the way to which she’d discovered some bracket fungus, which made her very happy). Cattails grew along the banks. The pollen of these plants, known as *puhuang*, had medicinal properties and could be used to aid clotting and as a diuretic.

There was an island in the middle of the marsh, and meanwhile a series of the sacred poles and ropes were set up at the border between the trees and the marsh, for places with water had long been said to be gateways to the other world. That might also explain why there was a small shrine on the island in the lake. The lord of the lake lived there; Maomao had heard that it took the form of a large snake.

There was a hut on the edge of the marsh for the person tasked with tending to the shrine, and that was where Maomao and Chou-u headed. The hut was built on stilts, to keep it clear of the water when there was a heavy rain—but in recent years, the marsh had begun to recede; marks could be seen on the stilts where the water had been. Maomao had heard that even the spot where this small house stood had once been part of the marsh, which might have explained why the ground was soft and muddy and difficult to

traverse. They took advantage of a succession of stepping stones to make the journey easier.

Beside the shack was an even smaller structure from which cooing could be heard—pigeons, Maomao suspected. At first she thought maybe they were being kept for food, but then she remembered what the chief had said—if his words were to be believed, it was forbidden to eat them. In which case, maybe they were pets.

Chou-u was inspecting the high-water marks with interest. Maomao went up the stairs that led to the hut and peeked inside. The person inside noticed her, too, for a hirsute old man shortly emerged from the house. Maomao had dealt with him before, and he seemed to remember her as well.

"Haven't seen you for ages. Thought maybe you'd gone off somewhere and got married," the old man said.

"Sorry, not yet."

"And yet that's quite the young lad you've got there!"

The old man hadn't grown any more delicate or civil while she was away, Maomao saw. He was an old acquaintance of Maomao's adoptive father Luomen; they had been doctors together once in the capital, long ago. This man was supposed to be quite skilled, but his somewhat unorthodox personality, combined with a misanthropic streak, now saw him living a hermit's life out here in the boondocks. He claimed to spend his time picking herbs and looking after the shrine, but his duties didn't seem to extend very far. There was no boat in the water, suggesting he didn't get over to the island much.

They went inside, where the old man took some dried herbs down off the wall and laid them on his crude table. "Here. Take what you need—but what you see is what I've got."

When Maomao needed an herb that was out of season, or some unusual plant, it was quickest to buy it from this old man. He even had *puhuang*, laid out on a mat made of cattail leaves.

The man settled himself into a chair with a "Hup!" and leaned forward. Maomao had heard that he was more than ten years older than Luomen—and he hadn't gotten any younger in the three years since she'd seen him last. He still knew how to dry herbs, though, and to a good quality. In good quantities too, despite his dotage.

"I'm impressed you were able to gather so much," Maomao said. "Here I was glad just to find you hadn't gone senile."

“Ahh, spinsters always have the sharpest tongues.”

“No worse than yours,” Maomao replied, earning a guffaw from Chou-u. She glared at him as she wrapped the herbs she needed in a cloth.

“It’s not all that surprising. I’ve had help lately,” the old man said.

“What, one of the village brats? Pretty good work for a kid.” Maomao deliberately looked at Chou-u as she said it; he stuck out his lip at her in a *What?* gesture.

“Naw, naw. Someone I picked up in the capital a bit back. Very capable. Look, speak of the devil...”

They heard footsteps coming up the stairs. “Hey, Gramps! I got the stuff you wanted! Huh? Guests?”

The newcomer’s voice was cheerful—and familiar. In walked a young man with a sack swinging in one hand and a scarf wrapped as a bandage around one eye.

That’s why I recognize that voice!

It was Kokuyou, the pockmarked man who, last Maomao knew, had been looking for work in the capital.

“But wouldn’t you know it, everyone said they didn’t want a doctor with such a creepy face!” Kokuyou said, sounding, as ever, as if the cascade of his misfortunes simply rolled right off his back. No sooner had he seen Maomao than the voluble man had started in chatting.

“Do they know each other?” Gramps had asked, to which Chou-u had replied, “She practically collects weird guys like him.”

In brief, after arriving at the capital, Kokuyou had gone from clinic to clinic, looking for somewhere to begin his practice as a physician. Each time, they would ask him about the patch over his eye, and like an idiot, he would give them a straight answer and show them his scars. The ignorant doctors chased him out, admonishing him never to come back lest he give them his illness. The less ignorant doctors understood the disease was no longer contagious, but even a physician was ultimately running a business. They had no compelling reason to hire a shifty-looking man with an eyepatch.

Gramps had been whipping his old bones into town to deliver some herbs a doctor had ordered from him, and it just so happened that at that very moment, Kokuyou was being chased out of the

same clinic. Gramps might have been a misanthrope, but he had an eye for medical talent. As age gradually slowed him down, he'd been thinking about finding a helper. He quizzed Kokuyou on his medical knowledge, and was surprised to discover the man knew more than Gramps would have expected—and so here he was. A man with an eyepatch would be less conspicuous here than in the capital, and anyway, the elderly physician had explained things to the village chief.

"Ha ha ha! Life can sure be tough, huh? But anyway, at least I get to eat!"

Gramps got a good helper, and Kokuyou—well, he was Kokuyou. Both of them seemed happy enough.

If I'd realized, maybe I would have asked him to join me, Maomao thought with a twinge of regret, but she couldn't go back in time. Even if she had brought him to the shop with her, the madam would only have worked him like a dog, the way she had Luomen. Maybe Kokuyou was better off here. Besides, Sazen was finally starting to get his feet under him, and Maomao didn't want to dent his confidence.

Kokuyou put his herbs on the table. "Fresh from the forest!" He grinned.

Chou-u peered up at him, then made a face like a particularly dumb-looking squirrel and stuck out his hand. "What's under the eyepatch, mister?"

"You want to see?" Kokuyou said, and then with a word of warning (*"It's pretty gross!"*), he lifted the eyepatch.

"Oh, yuck!" Chou-u exclaimed (politeness was not his strong suit) and pounded Kokuyou on the shoulder. "Too bad for you, mister. You could've been pretty popular with customers, if it weren't for...that."

"You said it! And here I like to think I'm good with people," Kokuyou replied.

"Our girls might've liked your face, too! Darn shame."

Our girls. Nice, Maomao thought, but otherwise she ignored their chatter, instead taking an appraising look at the herbs. She squinted at one of them, a large leaf she didn't recognize. "What's this?" she asked.

Kokuyou broke away from bantering with Chou-u long enough to say, "That's an 'incense' leaf."

An incense leaf—in other words, tobacco. The madam and the

prostitutes loved to smoke, but somewhat surprisingly, the practice hadn't caught on among the common people for the most part. Once, Maomao had repaired a damaged smoking pipe and had tried to return it to its owner, for she simply assumed it must be important to him.

Tobacco was a luxury item; it was addiction that kept the otherwise stingy madam smoking. Luomen informed Maomao that too much smoking was bad for your health. In any case, as far as Maomao knew, the leaves were usually imported, and she'd only ever seen them in a pulverized state, so she hadn't recognized the plant when she saw it.

"They're not actually that hard to grow," the old man interjected.

"Oh?" Maomao asked, studying the leaf with great interest. She was thinking that if she could get this to grow in their garden, it might prove a profitable side business. She doubted, though, that these two would simply cough up some seeds for her. She might at least be able to get them to share some of the leaves, but she questioned the wisdom of further entrenching the smoking habit among the courtesans by providing them with a cheap source of tobacco.

It couldn't hurt just to float the idea, she figured. She asked, "How much would you sell these for?"

"They're not for sale," the old man said, picking up the leaves and bundling several of them together before hanging them under the eaves.

For his own use? Maomao wondered. But she hadn't seen any smoking paraphernalia in the house, and she'd never seen the old man smoking.

As if in response to Maomao's unspoken question, the old man picked a jar up off the floor and set it on the table. He opened the lid and a distinctive odor came wafting out.

"Jeez, Gramps, that stinks!" Chou-u said, dramatically holding his nose. It didn't stop him from peeking inside, though, where he discovered a brown liquid. "You're not gonna ask us to...*drink* this, are you?"

"No, and you'd better not. It'd kill you dead. It's got incense leaves steeped in it."

"Ugh! Why would you have something like that around?" Chou-u asked, sitting back down on a wooden box on the floor.

“We use it to keep the snakes away,” the old man said.

Maomao clapped her hands: tobacco leaves were poisonous if eaten, and she knew the toxin affected insects. For the first time, it occurred to her that it might also work on snakes. Bugs were one thing, but snakes she always tried to catch—she never would have thought of trying to drive them away.

“It’s the best we can do with all this nonsense about not killing snakes. We have to be careful—wouldn’t want to cause any *problems*. But we also don’t want to get bit while we’re out picking vegetables, and I keep pigeons to boot.”

The old man was practically frothing; Kokuyou maintained a smile as he made tea. Chou-u’s eyes sparkled as he saw steamed buns emerge from the cupboard.

“Nobody gave two shits about this shrine for decades! Now they won’t shut up about some messenger of the snake god appearing. It’s a little late for them—the bridge to the island is good and broken,” the old man said.

“Ha ha ha! Shamans are the worst, aren’t they?” Kokuyou agreed cheerfully. Was there, perhaps, just a hint of personal animus in his jollity?

Maomao, meanwhile, found herself wondering about something. Last will and testament of the previous village chief or no, she questioned whether anyone in a small village like this would actually be so hesitant to kill a snake. Was it actually because a snake deity was once worshipped here?

“Was this shaman really that persuasive?” she asked coolly.

Gramps snorted. “Hah! Funny you should ask. The truly faithful say she changed form.”

“Changed form?” Maomao had heard of foxes transforming, but a snake?

Isn’t it enough that foxes can do it?

She gave them a confused look. Kokuyou opened the window of the hut, and Maomao found she could see the marsh and the shrine. Gramps looked out the window and rubbed his scraggly beard. “I didn’t see it myself. But they claim the shaman...”

They claimed the shaman had danced across the surface of the water to reach the shrine.

That’s got to be...

“It was said that proved the shaman was the god’s messenger.”

And there you had it.

...the shadiest thing I've ever heard!

Shady it might have been, but if it were true, then the "pale woman" the painter had witnessed could have been real as well.

"This shaman didn't happen to be a young woman with white hair and red eyes, did she?"

"No, no. She was a young woman, all right, but nobody said a word about her looking anything like that."

Chou-u was agog. "That's amazing! How did she walk on the water?"

"It's easy," Kokuyou said. "You just have to take the next step before your foot starts to sink. Then you do it again, and again. One step at a time." The lie seemed to come very easily to him.

"Awesome!"

Maomao bapped Chou-u on the head as a warning not to be so gullible, at the same time glowering at Kokuyou. She had just been starting to think of him as friendly and harmless when it turned out he was capable of something like this.

"Don't tell me you really believe she could do that," Maomao said.

"Hell, of course not. But...ahem." The old doctor continued scratching his chin and looking outside. He seemed conflicted. "Once, when I was a young man, I saw that very thing."

"You saw someone dancing across the surface of the water?" Maomao cocked her head. Chou-u copied her, as did Kokuyou, for some reason.

"Yeah. Back before I left the village. You know, it used to be the duty of the shrine maiden to serve the snake god." The old man's family were in fact distant relations of the village chief, and the young women who served at the shrine were of the same bloodline. Gramps had just said that the shrine had been all but abandoned for decades—but there was an explanation for that. "They came hunting for girls for the rear palace, and then there weren't any young women around here anymore."

What could one say? It was as simple as that. With that, rituals that had been passed down by word of mouth for generations disappeared, and the shrine fell into disuse. It was just about then that the previous village chief had taken over. Since the chief before him had been a man of scant faith, he allowed the shrine to sit unused, until it became decrepit, and even the bridge to the shrine's island rotted and collapsed. Then Gramps returned to the village

and became the keeper of the shrine, even if only nominally, living here in this hut.

"Didn't the shrine maiden come back to the village after completing her tenure at the rear palace?" Maomao asked.

"Heh. She always was a good-natured girl. Why should she come back to a place like this?"

Fair enough, Maomao thought, picturing Xiaolan, who had been her friend at the rear palace. Xiaolan's parents had sold her into service so as to have one less mouth to feed. She'd understood the reality—and had known that even if she went home, there would be no place for her. Instead, after leaving the rear palace, she had found work to support herself. A young woman with a half-decent head on her shoulders could probably have found any number of ways to earn a better living than the one she'd had in a village like this. There was more than one way in which the rear palace could be said to give its women a leg up in life.

"The former chief was all laments before he died, but my feeling was that if he was going to complain so much, he should have asked a *doctor* for help," Gramps said.

"Ha ha ha! That's funny. Yeah, some people are that way, huh?" Kokuyou chortled, but the old man gave him a gentle jab to the head. It wasn't *that* funny.

Maomao gazed outside. "I don't see a boat. How do *you* get across? I assume you have to check the condition of the shrine periodically."

Gramps drew a circle on the table. "Boats anger the deity, evidently. There's even one particular area set aside for fishing—although all you'll ever catch is loach, so it's not exactly worth the effort. So the shrine just goes unattended. You're welcome to go see it if you're interested—just not by boat."

"What is this, some kind of riddle?" Maomao asked. How was she supposed to get to the island without using a boat? Did he think she could walk on water?

"What, you thought it would be easy to get to a sacred place?" Nonsense-spouting old man. "Kokuyou, you take them. There should be a better view of the island on the far bank than here. And weed the fields while you're at it."

"Aw, what a chore," Kokuyou said, but he grabbed a hand scythe nonetheless.

"The tobacco grows over there. You can't have any leaves, but

if there are some seeds, you can take a few. Your payment for doing the weeding."

Maomao scowled at the old man, who seemed intent on turning the screw at every opportunity—but she also picked up a scythe.

Maomao's little band headed around to the far side of the marsh. Something that looked like lotus leaves floated on the surface of the water. Chou-u had been scared of Kokuyou's scars at first, but demonstrating that he had considerable adaptability if nothing else, he and Kokuyou were already fast friends. Chou-u was even wheedling piggyback rides out of the young doctor, although unlike the menservants, Kokuyou swayed a little under Chou-u's weight and it looked dangerous. Maybe only being able to see out of one eye threw off his sense of balance.

"There it is, over there," Kokuyou said, as a bridge connecting the bank to the back side of the small island came into view. The bridge was rotten, though, and there wasn't much of it left. Maomao looked at it in disbelief: even the foundation was coming apart; it hardly looked like it could support a wooden board.

Kokuyou, evidently much on the same page as Maomao, produced a wooden board from somewhere. "Here we go," he said, placing it across the rickety foundation.

"Is that safe?" Maomao asked, feeling a growing sense of unease as she watched him.

"Ha ha ha, sure it is. You'd be surprised how sturdy this thing is." To demonstrate, he jumped up onto the board—which promptly gave way, dumping him into the marsh with an "Oops!"

"What are you doing, man?" Chou-u said, reaching out to help pull Kokuyou to his feet. With a *glorp*, though, Kokuyou sank deeper. A thrill of fear ran through the group.

"I don't suppose this is one of those b-bottomless swamps, do you?" Kokuyou asked, still smiling.

For a second, neither Maomao nor Chou-u said anything, but after the instant of silence, everyone burst into activity. The more Kokuyou struggled, however, the deeper he sank. Just as he was up to his neck in marsh water, Maomao managed to find a robust-looking vine in the woods and drag it out, so the man could use it to pull himself free.

"You're gonna give me a heart attack, mister," Chou-u said.

"Ha ha ha! Sorry about that," Kokuyou replied, scratching the

back of his head with a muddy hand. (Thus the one remaining clean part of him got as dirty as the rest.)

Maomao grabbed a bucket of irrigation water from the nearby field and brought it over—after which she took the path of least resistance, namely, dumping it over his head. Kokuyou shook himself off like a wet dog.

"Oh yeah... The old guy told me that it was around this marsh where they say kids get spirited away," Kokuyou said.

"Yikes," Chou-u said, not looking pleased. There was no telling how many people were buried down in the muck.

Maomao looked at the decaying bridge. "They really didn't take any care of it."

"Maintenance costs money. I guess there's something about the composition of the mud here that does more damage than ordinary water."

The marsh might not be bottomless, strictly speaking, but it was certainly deeper than Kokuyou was tall. Replacing the foundation regularly would have been nothing short of a problem. Elements of the foundation could be seen extending well beyond the marsh, implying that the marsh had once occupied that entire area.

A panoply of wild plants grew all around the shrine on the small island. They were bright and colorful, suggesting that they might be flowers, but it was hard to tell from this distance—the one thing that was certain was that it was a color one rarely saw in this area. Birds flew over frequently enough; maybe the seeds had made it down here in some poop.

"All right, let's get down to business," Kokuyou said, sounding energetic despite still being speckled with mud in places. He was suddenly wearing a reed hat. (Where had he gotten that from?)

The field was bristling with weeds; Maomao was about to say exactly what she thought of that, but Chou-u beat her to the punch: "Ugh!" he exclaimed, his shoulders slumping. After that, she felt she couldn't say anything. Instead, she dutifully went about weeding, keeping her eyes open for any tobacco seeds. But there weren't any.

Wily old bastard, she thought, resolving to be sure she wrung some seeds out of him before she went home.

Kokuyou hummed cheerily as he went about the job, and Maomao felt compelled to help out. Chou-u, who seemed not to have had any intention of helping to begin with, went around collecting pebbles and drawing in the dirt.

For a while, they focused on their work. The humidity was high in the marsh. The muddy soil looked rich in nutrients, but by the same token, they would cause roots to rot in a hurry. That might have explained the dash of sand mixed into the soil of the field. Thankfully, it made the weeds easy to pull out.

"Hey, did you know?" Kokuyou said. He had stopped humming, but he almost sounded like he was talking to himself.

"What?" Maomao said.

"About the shrine maidens they used to have in this village."

Maomao gave him a perplexed look. How would she know anything about that?

"Gramps told me that their job was to placate the great snake spirit. But the maidens were originally slave girls."

Maomao didn't say anything. Chou-u was still drawing, oblivious to their conversation. Kokuyou continued, whispering so only Maomao could hear, "I guess the river used to flood here a lot. Until they developed flood control, the fields used to get inundated every year. Even the houses were underwater sometimes."

What did people do in those olden times when they were powerless in the face of catastrophic natural disasters? They engaged in meaningless behaviors.

"It's said they bought slaves to use as sacrifices. That was when there was money to spare, of course—when there wasn't, they probably chose some poor village girl."

So "shrine maiden" was just a pleasant epithet for a human sacrifice.

"But then..."

One day, a shrine maiden possessed of spiritual powers appeared. She even, so it was said, danced across the water in the sight of all the villagers.

"Gramps" has really opened up to this guy, Maomao thought. All these stories were new to her. The old man must have been privy to this lore because of his family's connection to the shrine maidens. It seemed strange that at the same time, he was also distantly related to the village chief.

"I guess that meant that if you *didn't* possess those powers, you could expect to be sacrificed sooner or later," Kokuyou said. Whether you were sacrificed to the god of this or the lord of that probably didn't matter much to the person suffering the ritual. "But then just when she thought she'd escaped, she gets sent to the rear

palace instead!"

Thus, given not to the master of the lake, but the master of the land.

No wonder she didn't want to come back. Maomao saw now why the young woman had never returned, as the old man had told her. Who could blame her if, indeed, she felt some anger at her hometown?

Maomao gazed distantly at the water. The surface rippled, but to judge by Kokuyou's state after falling in, it was mostly mud down there. She picked up a stick lying nearby and jabbed it into the water. Once it sank into the muck, it was hard to pull back out.

"Less of a marsh and more of a bog. The flood measures might have dispersed the water flowing into it, but maybe the shrinking marsh has made it muddier," Maomao said. She stood up from where she had been crouching. "Do you know when the marsh started shrinking?"

"I guess I don't. You could try asking Gramps," Kokuyou said.

Maomao scratched her chin and stirred the mud as best she was able. She suddenly discovered Chou-u was standing beside her, also stirring. "You drop something?" he asked.

"No," Maomao said.

It rained a lot at this time of year—the water level probably wasn't at its peak yet. That meant the marsh would only be even more muddy during the dry season.

Suddenly, Maomao jumped to her feet.

"What's the matter, Freckles?" Chou-u asked, looking at her, but she ignored him and ran off. "Hey, Freckles!"

"Huh? What's going on?" Kokuyou asked. Maomao didn't answer him; she made a beeline for the hut where the old man lived. She didn't want to stand and chat with the two of them—she was desperate to test the idea she'd had as soon as possible.

Even as she ran, a smile came over Maomao's face.

"Boy, where'd that come from? What's she think she's doing?" Chou-u grumbled, but he and Kokuyou followed along just the same. Chou-u must have gotten tired of running partway there, because when they arrived at the shack, Kokuyou was carrying him on his back.

Maomao vaulted up the stairs and knocked on the door. No sooner had the old man opened it than she burst out, "Give me

some tobacco seeds!"

Gramps was slurping some noodles, looking almost as if he were eating his own beard. "Is *that* what you're here about? If there weren't any seeds in the field, too bad." He began to chew his mouthful of noodles noisily.

Maomao had been expecting something like this, but she had an idea. "What if I told you I could identify the notorious shaman?" she whispered.

The man's unpleasant chewing stopped and he set down his chopsticks. "Kokuyou, c'mere. Take this and go entertain the kid." He pulled a ball off the shelf and tossed it to Kokuyou, who failed to catch it and had to run outside after it, Chou-u trotting behind him.

With the interlopers cleared out, the old man motioned Maomao to sit. She seated herself in a chair and looked out the window at the marsh. "Let me venture a guess: when this shaman appeared, it was the time of year when the water level was dropping."

The painter had seen the white-haired, red-eyed woman about six months ago, give or take—that would be the season of little rain. Less water in the marsh would mean more bog.

"That's right," Gramps said.

"And the shrine maiden did her dance at roughly the same time of year, am I right?"

"I don't see what that has to do with anything."

Maomao moistened her finger in the water jug, then started sketching a map on the tabletop: a circle representing the lake, after which she added the little island and the bridge. Gramps must have found it hard to see the water map, because he offered her a brush and paper. Crude materials, but still easier to see. Maomao started writing.

She pointed to the bank nearest the island, the farthest point from the river that fed into the marsh. "Was that about where the rain dance was performed?"

"Yes, that's right," the physician said. The place could be seen from the window of the hut they were now in.

"This shrine maiden or shaman or whatever she was invoked the blessing of the great snake god and walked across the water. What if I told you I could do the same thing?" asked Maomao.

The old man squinted at her, clearly skeptical. "That's enough silliness out of you. If I might say so, I don't think you have the

figure to attract the snake god."

"Gee, old man, I didn't realize you were such a devout believer." Their eyes met. Maomao smiled, trying to provoke him. If she was right, this old man knew something, something he wasn't telling her.

It was almost as if he could read her mind. "Luomen would never operate on an assumption that way," he said.

"That's exactly why I want to investigate the marsh: to substantiate that assumption."

Gramps gave her a glare, but got up as if inviting her to follow him. "You're not one for having a little mystery in life, are you? Not that I'm one to talk. The thing to do at a moment like this is just to believe that immortals and shrine maidens really exist." The old man almost spat the words out, but then he called to the pair playing with the ball outside, "Go buy somethin' that'll pass for dinner!"

He gave Kokuyou some change. Evidently he didn't think the ball would distract them for long enough. "Now, listen, kid; this schlub is always getting ripped off. Sorry, but do you think you could go with and keep an eye on him?"

"Sure! Just leave it to me," Chou-u said, and went after Kokuyou again. Maomao and the old physician stayed where they were until the other two were out of sight. Then the doctor said, "Let's go."

He brought her to an area of the marsh that had been fenced off. Floating plants grew on the surface of the water. Maomao frowned at the boggy ground, taking off her shoes and holding up her skirt as they went. Gramps, for his part, hiked up the legs of his trousers.

The water was dark and cloudy.

"The shrine maiden walked from here to the island. If you can manage the same thing, I'll tell you whatever you want to know." Then he dropped his voice to a menacing whisper and said, "Before the shrine maiden, the young women who were brought here were called sacrifices, and they were drowned in this marsh. Tied to weights and sunk into the fathomless depths alive. My great-grandmother told me how she tried to cover her ears as the girls cried and sobbed their last, every attempt at struggle dragging them closer to their doom. No guarantees you won't end up the same way."

It may have been a revered custom, yet it must also have been a terrifying sight for the villagers who witnessed it. And then they felt remorse for what they had done and begged forgiveness, though it meant nothing by that point.

Stone pillars stood around the marsh, constructed of similarly sized rocks piled one atop the other, with the largest of all standing on top. Cairns of some type, perhaps.

"So, how exactly did the maiden cross the marsh?" the old man asked.

Maomao took out some rope she'd brought from the house along with a couple of thin wooden boards. "All right if I borrow these?"

"Suit yourself."

"Thank you."

She punched three holes in each board and ran the rope through them to create what looked like crude sandals. They weren't very impressive, but she put them on, thinking, *Paddy sandals would be perfect right about now.* Paddy sandals were footwear used by people planting rice fields—but wishing wouldn't get her anywhere.

The old man was watching her curiously now, but for the time being she kept quiet. She rolled up her robe to keep it clear of the ground, then wrapped a rope around her body, tying the other end to one of the stone pillars. Then she began.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Gramps asked.

"Substantiating."

Maomao put a foot in the marsh—or more properly, she almost kicked against it, the impact causing her foot to bounce back. The old man was startled, but Maomao was already taking her next step, kicking forcefully. She did this again and again, working her way across the bog.

She was, indeed, walking on water. It wasn't quite the way Kokuyou had suggested, but she took each step before her foot could sink, then repeated the process. It was enough to keep her on the surface.

"How's that? I can walk on the water." Maomao grinned, full of confidence.

The old man touched his beard, astonished. "That's something special, I'll give you that." He picked up a long stick lying nearby, took a step into the marsh, and plunged it into the water. There was

a hard, sharp sound. “But you don’t have to go to all that work. There are more of those cairns in the marsh.” He struck the large stone pillar again.

“What?” Maomao said, flabbergasted. In her amazement, she stopped moving her feet—which promptly sank into the bog. Gramps ended up having to pull her out.

“How’d you do that, anyway?” Gramps asked the mud-covered Maomao after he’d extricated her.

Maomao took off her “shoes” and looked at the marsh, tired. “When you’ve got something that’s not quite liquid and not quite solid, it has some special properties,” she said. It might have been easiest to demonstrate if she’d had some potato starch on hand. Mix that into water at a specific ratio, and you could pick it up with your hand—but it would soon flow out between your fingers.

This marsh was very similar. That was why Maomao had asked Gramps what time of year it had been when the maiden danced across the water. And Maomao had put on her improvised footwear because she’d judged there was a little too much water in the mix to do otherwise.

She’d figured that some of the “sacrifices” had noticed that when the marsh shrank and the ratio of mud to water changed, you could walk over it. But she hadn’t been quite right.

“A gimmick like this? That’s not very fair,” she said.

“The stone pillars sunk in the marsh are grave markers for the dead sacrifices,” the old man replied firmly. They were buried such that even in the dry season, they weren’t visible. Ten of them, or maybe a little more—intimating the number of women who had been drowned.

“Long ago, when the time for the next sacrifice was decided, the son of the village chief told the unfortunate girl about the grave markers.” Then it was the young woman who had the “lord of the lake” on her side, and she became the shrine maiden. “That was more than fifty years ago now.”

The previous village chief evidently hadn’t known about the stones. It looked to Maomao as if the only one who was aware of them was this man here. She glared at him: he’d known all along, and he’d kept quiet about it. Why would he do that, except perhaps if there was something he felt guilty about?

“Was the shaman a woman with white hair?” Maomao asked

again.

But again, the doctor shook his head. “Haven’t had anyone like that around here.” However, he did have something else to add. He began speaking, telling Maomao about how by sheer chance, in the capital he’d run into the former shrine maiden who had been sent to the rear palace. She’d had a granddaughter by then.

The former shrine maiden had asked him, what was the state of the great snake god today? The physician explained that even without a shrine maiden, improvements in flood-control technology meant that the river and the marsh no longer overflowed their banks. The snake god became simple superstition, his shrine went to ruin, and no one now visited it.

“I can’t help thinking maybe it would have been better if I’d told her the shrine was doing well, that thanks to the great snake, we were safe from floods. Even if it wasn’t true,” he said.

The former shrine maiden had been incredulous at what the old man told her. It was as if all the shrine maidens who had gone down to the depths had died in vain. The thought enraged the woman.

“Not long after, she and her granddaughter came to the village. The former shrine maiden said she served a new snake god, and that was when she had her granddaughter cross the marsh.”

A new snake god? Maomao thought of the white sacred ropes, the snake deity, and the white-haired woman the painter had seen. She picked up the pole and plunged it into the marsh, seeking out the cairns as she worked her way toward the little island. The old man was right; this was a more reliable method than the one Maomao had tried. As long as your feet were steady, you could make it.

She hopped over to the island. It was home to the dilapidated shrine, rampant wild grasses—and flowers with small, red petals blowing in the wind. These flowers didn’t live long; some of the petals were already dropping, leaving bald plants behind. Had they been planted here, or had some seeds just happened to drop in the area? All Maomao knew was that the plants should not have been here.

“Poppies?” she heard the old man say, and from his tone, she could tell he was discovering them for the first time. Maybe he hadn’t been over to the island before, even though he knew how to get there.

“May I ask you another question?” Maomao said.

“Go ahead. I’ll tell you anything now.”

“How is it you know about the grave markers?”

Gramps smiled. “You know I’m related to the shrine maidens—which means I’m a slave’s son. It’s not unusual for the powerful in a village to get *involved* with the slaves.”

He’d said it was the village chief’s son who had told the former shrine maiden about the existence of the burial pillars. That would seem to imply the chief had gotten a slave woman with child—and that child was Gramps.

“When the chieftain tired of this slave, she was passed on to the next villager, until finally, when starvation threatened, she was used as a sacrifice.”

For there to be grave markers, there had to be someone to put them up—to cut the rock and pile stone upon stone over the course of years. Not to mention, to then carry the stones to their location across the other markers already in place.

“This marker just in front of the island is the last one. It saved my little sister from drowning...” the doctor said.

Then instead, she had been sent to the rear palace. It was not the village chief’s daughter who had gone, but the offspring of the slave woman and whomever she had been “passed on to.” When the child came back decades later, she discovered that the villagers who had murdered her mother and used her own life for their ends had forgotten all about the local deity and the women who had been sacrificed as shrine maidens to it.

Maomao looked at the tobacco leaves on the far shore. “Did you, perchance, get those from the former shrine maiden?”

“I did. But not the poppy seeds. She gave the tobacco to me as a sort of souvenir, asking two favors in return.”

“And will you tell me about those too?”

“Yes—it’s time I told someone. The water level’s still high right now, so they’ve stayed hidden, but when the autumn comes, the tops of the grave markers will peek out. I was able to keep everyone off the trail until last year, but I don’t think I can manage it anymore.”

The shaman would be revealed as a fraud.

“The first favor was this: that I stay quiet, even knowing what I knew.”

The injunctions against the villagers killing snakes or birds were

probably the shaman's small form of revenge. This old man might object to her methods, but he chose to look the other way.

"The other..." The elderly physician looked at his stilt hut. "The other was that I give her free use of my pigeon coop."

"Pigeon coop? What in the world did she want with that?" Maomao asked, tilting her head in confusion. Come to think of it, she'd heard pigeons cooing in the village too. Did they normally keep free-range birds?

"Don't kill flying birds"...

Compared to the rule about snakes, this admonition almost seemed like an afterthought.

Maomao worked her way back across the grave markers toward the hut. Several times she almost slipped on the slick stone, but she was in a hurry to get to the pigeon coop.

As she approached, her nose prickled at its distinctive odor. Inside, there were several dozen birds with dark-greenish feathers. They flapped excitedly, surprised by Maomao's sudden arrival, but she ignored their reaction. Instead, she grabbed each one and tossed it aside in turn.

"Hey! Leave the poor birds alone!" Gramps sputtered. So he thought of them as something more than food—but that was also immaterial to Maomao at that moment. Finally she found what she was looking for. She grabbed one bird around the back and flipped it over, plucking off the thing attached to its leg: a piece of twisted white string. It was grimy in places; she guessed it had gotten dirty while the animal was outside.

Maomao left the pigeon coop and undid the string. It turned out to be a single piece of cloth, embroidered with characters that really did look like a scribbled snake.

I know I've seen these before, Maomao thought. They looked much like the embroidery on the fire-rat cloak she'd seen at the used clothing store. If you knew what you were looking at, you could tell it wasn't just a random pattern—it was a code, based on characters from the western reaches.

Maomao thought back to the fortune-teller from the western capital—how she had used a pigeon feather instead of a brush to write with. For some time now, Maomao had been grappling with the fact that the White Lady somehow seemed to be everywhere at once in this country. Surely the young woman couldn't actually travel so widely? Her albino appearance might make her seem

uncanny, but she couldn't actually use magic like the immortals were said to do. Practically the reverse, in fact—with skin so sensitive to sunlight, she wouldn't be able to spend much time outside in bright regions.

So it wouldn't be the White Lady herself who moved about; Maomao assumed she directed confederates instead. The problem with that hypothesis was information: in order to release the lion from its cage or make contact with Consort Lishu's half-sister, the White Lady would need a way to exchange information quickly between the western capital and the Imperial capital in the central region. Even the fastest horse would take more than ten days to reach the west from the capital, and coming back would take nearly as long, even if one went by boat.

How had she solved that conundrum? These pigeons.

"Hey, Gramps, does the former shrine maiden herself come to visit the pigeon coop?"

"Her granddaughter does. She took a few of them with her, said she was going to use them for a curse or something."

"Aren't you eventually going to run out of pigeons?"

"No, they come right back to this coop when I release them. Unless an animal—or a human—gets them first."

In other words, she could communicate, taking advantage of these pigeons' aptitude. Maomao closed her eyes, thought for a second about what she should do, and then looked at the old man. It was possible harm would come to the former shrine maiden and her granddaughter. They seemed like they might be connected to the White Lady.

Maomao clicked her tongue. "Want to work with me this time, Gramps?"

"What? What are you talking about?"

Maomao wasn't entirely bereft of decency. She could just go straight to Jinshi without saying another word to the old man, but she chose not to. Instead she began to negotiate, feeling out how far he would go, where in the middle he would meet her.

Chapter 12: The Trials of Consort Lishu

Jinshi got a letter from Maomao the day after his informal meeting with the messenger from the west: *I found a clue about the White Lady in a village called Golden Lake.* It was most convenient for him—or perhaps most inconvenient.

The "messenger from the west" was one of the emissaries from Shaoh who had visited Li the year before, a woman named Aylin. She and her companion had looked so much alike that they might have been twins, but the other woman, Ayla—well, matters turned out to be complicated.

When last she had visited, Ayla wore a red hairband and Aylin a blue one; this time, Aylin's entire garment was blue. Because of the covert nature of her mission, she wore nothing conspicuous, but rather a *quju shenyi*, a robe with a curved hem that was quite common in Li.

In truth, she was not someone with whom Jinshi ought to have been meeting *too* personally. The last time she'd seen him, he'd been dressed up as a woman and she had, embarrassingly, taken him for the moon spirit.

Besides, he was busy. He wondered what she would talk about at this moment, whose guidance she was under; but it turned out to be Lahan's. Jinshi had thought he'd seemed to be up to something in the western capital, but he felt certain Lahan of all people wouldn't be doing anything sketchy, and had let the matter slide. It wasn't that he trusted Lahan so much as that he had a certain understanding of the other man's psychology. Lahan had some sort of fixation on "beautiful numbers" and "unbeautiful numbers," and although Jinshi couldn't claim to quite understand it, he gathered that Lahan wouldn't do anything that violated his standards of "beauty."

Jinshi had expected about half of what Aylin said to him; the other half had been unexpected, but none of it was completely

unreasonable. Lahan was already privy to the two points Aylin had brought up, and he hadn't shown any particular reaction.

One thing she said did make Jinshi's head hurt: food exports or political asylum.

Lahan had already talked to Jinshi about exports in the form of a root vegetable called sweet potatoes. It was a promising crop, one that could be grown even in poor soil and yielded a harvest many times that of rice. The fact that Lahan could come to him with such an idea immediately upon his return to the capital reminded him afresh that the La clan was nothing to sneeze at.

The result was that Jinshi had spent the two weeks since his return working virtually without sleep. Just catching up was bad enough, but now there was even more to be done. His concerns at the rear palace were not over either—another headache-inducing situation had arisen.

He would have to find a way to justify exports to Shaoh to the bureaucracy, and it was unlikely that claiming they were a hedge against insect plague would do it. All the various measures Jinshi had already taken against the plague had seemed like enough. Any preventative moves the members of the bureaucracy made would be to forestall a catastrophe they foresaw falling upon their own heads. They didn't want to give themselves more work to do because of some groundless anxiety.

That was the reality of it, so Jinshi had come up with a pretext: the forced labor to which the criminals captured during the Shi clan rebellion would be put would be agricultural work. No one would object to the opening of new lands for that purpose. And when it came to land, there was plenty of it in the former Shi clan domain of Shihoku-shu. With the Shi stranglehold over the region broken, negotiations were likely to be easier than before. And there were lots of former farmers among the criminals. Their livelihoods would have gone back to how they had been before the clan had hired them—it might even be a little harder than it had been before.

Jinshi wouldn't even have to put the plan into motion himself; he had somebody to handle things on his behalf. Specifically, a high official put in charge of Shihoku-shu after the destruction of the Shi clan. Someone who had been born and raised in the area, in fact, and had worked their way up the ranks as a regional official. They had experienced famine in the past, and when Jinshi had explained how growing sweet potatoes would prevent further starvation in the

future, his case had been eagerly heard.

Any necessary personnel could be recruited in Shihoku-shu. There was a ready supply of third sons of farmers, men who weren't entitled to any fields. If the rear palace could be considered public service under the empress regnant, then so could this.

That was as far as Jinshi's planning had gone—he was quite capable, but he was no genius. There were still kinks to smooth out in the idea, but he would leave the details to those carrying it out. There would be pressure, yes, but they would just have to rise to the occasion. Jinshi didn't love to simply delegate matters, but he had other things to do. He was always slightly overworked, but he liked to think he had a sense of the scope of his duties.

Jinshi lacked many truly trustworthy subordinates, but he did have a few. Each had their strengths, roles to which they were best suited. He picked up his cup as he considered what he would do about this letter. His ever-attentive lady, Suiren, saw the cup was empty, and with a "Well, now," poured him more juice.

Jinshi watched her, then spontaneously decided to show her Maomao's letter. "Do we have anyone available right now?" he asked.

"Yes, several who just came back."

"Pick someone suitable, then."

"All right." Suiren put her hand to her cheek, thinking. "Why don't we try somebody new? It should be interesting."

"Are you sure that's safe?" Jinshi asked uneasily.

Suiren, though, continued to smile broadly. "Have I been wrong yet?"

Jinshi could only offer a rueful smile in response to this display of confidence. Suiren had once attended upon the Empress Dowager herself—even Maomao couldn't get the better of her. Suiren was one of those who had helped see to the safety of the Empress Dowager in that den of iniquity, the rear palace—the Empress Dowager, who had become pregnant with the current Emperor at barely more than ten years old. Jinshi was convinced that the fact that Suiren had been assigned to attend him was a show of motherly concern on the part of the Empress Dowager.

"If you still don't believe me, then let me tell you a little secret," Suiren said, and then she whispered in Jinshi's ear.

His eyes went wide. "Is that true?"

"Yes. I was administering a bit of punishment when I

discovered…”

Suiren’s “secret” had no bearing whatsoever on Jinshi’s work—but it was very useful information to him personally. He wondered, though: what was this punishment she was talking about? He decided that for the moment, some questions were better left unasked.

“I’m sure you’d like to emerge victorious from time to time, Young Master,” Suiren said, with a gesture that was girlish and charming despite her years. No sooner had Jinshi registered that, though, than she had returned to the prim, capable lady-in-waiting. “I’ll see to it immediately,” she said. She bowed, and exited the room without so much as the sound of a footstep.

Jinshi knew Suiren would take care of things. He could focus on other work.

The other problem brought to him by Special Envoy Aylin, for example. Something that appeared to be news even to Lahan. Jinshi hadn’t wanted to hear it; he would have preferred to plug his ears. It was enough to threaten to shatter his impenetrable smile.

What kind of problem was it? It had to do with the White Lady.

And because of it, he would miss another chance to visit the apothecary shop in the pleasure district.

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“The White Lady has been apprehended.”

She was informed two days after the events at the village and its marsh. Considering that it would have taken her letter a day to arrive, things had happened about as quickly as humanly possible.

It was Basen who brought the message, and Ukyou who brought Basen to the shop when he’d spotted the young man standing uncomfortably in the foyer of the Verdigris House. Basen had visibly relaxed when Maomao had told him that her sister Pairin was with someone that day and wasn’t in.

The shop was rather cramped, so Maomao asked the madam to ready a room for them. The brothel had many chambers that were excellent for private conversations—but only assuming Chou-u didn’t find them. The overcurious brat would inject himself directly into any conversation. Thankfully, Ukyou volunteered to distract him.

Maomao took a sip of the tea that had been served to them. “Is

that right?"

"I expected more enthusiasm," Basen said.

"I assure you, I'm quite shocked."

Basen, it seemed, still wasn't accustomed to reading Maomao's expressions. Jinshi or Gaoshun would certainly have registered the slight furrow in her brow.

After the discovery that the White Lady was using pigeons to facilitate her information network, they had quickly turned the setup against her. Maomao had assumed they could read one of the letters, snatch the person who came to get it, and probably learn something—but she'd never imagined it would go quite so easily.

What had really made the difference was that she was able to bring in help.

With that help, Maomao had gone to the old man who worshipped the great snake. She believed he had the interests of his somewhat duplicitous sister and her granddaughter at heart, and she knew that somehow or other, to a greater extent or a lesser, they were connected with the White Lady. The man could stay quiet, but it wouldn't save the women from punishment. So, Maomao urged him, he should defect. (Call it blackmail if you must.)

"We staked out the pigeon coop, and when we detained the person who visited it, they led us to the villa of a particular bureaucrat," Basen said.

They had asked the old man's younger sister and her granddaughter whether they could identify the official in question, and the women said they knew him; they also identified several other bureaucrats who were friends with this man. One of them, it transpired, was harboring the White Lady.

"Kind of anticlimactic. I can't help wondering, though—why would anyone go so far to protect her?" Maomao said.

"The bureaucrats were passionate cannabis smokers, and traces of what's thought to be opium were also found in the house."

"Ah." But of course: once someone was hooked on narcotics, they might do anything to get them. Getting such a drug out of your life took considerable resolve as well. "Just goes to show one shouldn't fool around with dangerous drugs, I guess."

"You're one to talk!" Basen said. She ignored his profoundly doubtful look, instead thinking about what medicine she would mix up today. Basen had presumably come just to tell her about what

had happened, so his business was finished. His hand was better now; the bandage was off. Really, though, Maomao wasn't sure why they couldn't have sent her a letter, or at least some other messenger. No reason for Basen to come here and be terrified by the courtesans.

Despite having delivered his message, however, Basen showed no sign of getting up to leave. Instead he kept stealing glances at Maomao, his mouth almost opening and then shutting again.

At length she asked, "Is something the matter, sir?"

"Ahem. No, I..."

Maomao was curious, but didn't actually want to get involved. Whatever it was, it probably meant trouble—and worse, it probably meant Jinshi. Yes, definitely better to steer clear.

She hadn't seen Jinshi since they'd parted ways at the western capital. The extent of their contact had been her letter about the White Lady, to which his reply had been businesslike.

I hope he'll just pretend nothing happened. That would be the most harmonious thing, in her opinion. Unfortunately, the world wasn't a decent enough place to give you harmony just because you wanted it.

Basen finally stopped flapping his mouth and looked her square in the eye, clearly resolved to say what he had to say. "I have a question for you. If a woman's menstrual period doesn't come, is it fair to assume that she's pregnant?"

Maomao greeted this with silence—she never did know what this man was going to say next! Basen scowled at the disdainful look she gave him, but his face grew steadily redder. Frankly, Maomao wasn't sure what to make of such a hopelessly virginal response. He wanted to know how to tell if a woman was pregnant? Could it be he'd fallen in with some bad girl who'd taken advantage of him?

I guess I could see it, she thought. Basen always did seem to come up a little short, man-wise. There was no end of people in the world who, under the influence of a bit too much to drink, made a night's mistake. And considering Basen's status, there must be any number of women eager to share a drink with him.

She knew this was something she couldn't tease him about; she had to be serious. "Master Basen," she began. "I know you may feel you were duped, but a real man takes responsibility for his actions."

Basen looked at her incredulously.

“If it really is your child, then you have to do what’s right. Not that that makes it okay that she took advantage of you, but—”

“Hold on. What are you talking about?”

“The poor girl you got pregnant, Master Basen.”

“I didn’t get anyone pregnant!” Basen slammed a fist against the floor, the impact so powerful it made Maomao feel like she might be flung into the air. It was his right fist—wasn’t he afraid he would injure it again?

“Why are you asking, then?”

“W-Well, it’s...” His mouth started opening and closing again, but he managed to lean in and whisper into Maomao’s ear: “It’s about Consort Lishu.”

Maomao looked at him, thunderstruck. *No way. No way...*

Yes, there had seemed to be a certain something between them; if you could only disregard their respective stations, Basen and Lishu could have made a pretty nice—

Hold on. When the hell would they have had the time?

Surely there hadn’t been a free moment. Then again, Maomao had hardly been watching them twenty-four seven, so she couldn’t be sure. Then again *again*, had they ever looked like they’d—? She tried to remember.

She seemed to be confused, in her own way. As she thought, she rifled through her medicine cabinet and produced a packet of something that she placed in front of Basen. “This is a relatively harmless abortifacient,” she said—something she kept on hand for the courtesans.

“I’m not certain I can control my strength—but may I hit you?” Basen asked with uncharacteristic politeness. The touch of civility, in fact, indicated how angry he was. Maomao knew she’d never survive a blow from someone with his absurd strength, and she delicately put the medicine away.

Basen cleared his throat, drinking some of the cold tea in an effort to bring down the flush that had come into his face, a combination of frustration and embarrassment. “Ahem. What I’m saying is, a certain august personage is in a difficult position.” Apparently desperate to avoid using so much as a personal pronoun, he resorted to extremely circuitous locutions. “When one has been away from a certain place for quite a long time, and then returns to this certain place, one is subject to the same strictures as if one were entering it for the first time.”

A certain place was no doubt the rear palace.

"Ah, so that's what's going on," Maomao said, slapping her knees.

There were stipulations when entering the rear palace: just as any men were expected to be eunuchs, there were certain things that a woman had to do as well. Nothing as difficult as what was demanded of the men, but the last thing they wanted was for a woman to enter the rear palace with a child already in her belly. Thus, a woman was only allowed entry after she had been confirmed to be menstruating.

There were occasional exceptions for temporary leave, but these were typically in order to pay one's respects to a groom's family on the occasion of a woman's marriage—the name of her partner was recorded, so if she did get pregnant, they knew who to blame. Most women then left before the child was even born.

A woman who had been away from the rear palace for almost two months, and a high consort at that, couldn't expect to simply walk back in. Lishu's problem was that it had now been more than a month since she'd returned from the western capital.

"So her period is late?" Maomao asked. Basen nodded miserably. "Well, Consort Lishu is young, so they might be irregular, and when you consider the toll that traveling must have taken on her, it can't be that surprising if she's a little late."

That, though, was speaking purely from a health perspective. The fact that Basen was talking to her, and that he knew such personal information, meant there was something else going on.

What might happen to a woman who was suspected of getting pregnant outside the confines of the rear palace—one of His Majesty's highest consorts, at that? Especially when the reason she'd left the rear palace on this occasion was that she might be given to the Emperor's younger brother, Jinshi, in marriage? If Basen was aware of this situation, it was likely Jinshi was too.

If that girl didn't have bad luck, she'd have no luck at all, Maomao thought. She had to sympathize with all the tribulations Lishu had been subject to, considering they were no fault of her own. She was already bullied and ridiculed; if people thought she was engaged to Jinshi, jealous stares would start coming her way.

Pregnant, though? Consort Lishu hardly seemed qualified to *get* pregnant. She'd never even been "visited" by the Emperor. In light of which, Maomao was starting to think she saw what Basen was

driving at.

"You want me to prove that nothing untoward happened with Consort Lishu."

That brought an undisguised look of relief to Basen's face. "You'll do it?"

"I will. I'll need to be able to go to the palace, though, and I'm not sure they'll let me in. A doctor maybe, but a random apothecary?"

"Don't worry about that. I've already spoken to the head of the medical office. And Sir Luomen has kindly agreed to come as well."

That made things easy. So Basen had already had everything in place when he arrived. As for why Luomen was involved, it was likely Basen didn't trust the quack to handle this, but knew that not just any (male) doctor could attend on the consort. Maomao's adoptive father was the perfect compromise.

Maomao was excited at the prospect of seeing her old man again—it had been a while. She felt bad for Lishu, but she personally was downright happy.

Basen, by contrast, continued to look grim. Maybe she should have pursued the matter with him—but she wasn't thinking about it that deeply at the time.

The next day, a messenger from the palace arrived. Maomao left Sazen in charge of the shop, as usual.

"Please don't be long!" he said. What was he, her pet dog? He was always like this. Maomao had made sure Chou-u would be out shopping with Ukyou when she left, and she was glad she had. She'd talked to the madam, and even the old lady understood the boy couldn't possibly go with her to the palace.

Chou-u might have been gone, but Maomao the cat nuzzled at her persistently, until she picked her up by the scruff of the neck and put her on Sazen's head.

"Hey, I'm hot..." he said, but he didn't look especially unhappy as he savored the white fur of the cat's belly against his face.

It seemed to be a perk of these outings that they felt she needed to be presentable, and so gave her new clothes whenever she was summoned on these errands. They never asked for them back, so Maomao always either sold the outfits to the used clothing store or put them up for auction among the courtesans. In addition to the usual robe, this time there was a white overrobe. Something to

serve as a doctor's apron in this warm season.

If they were summoning Maomao, it implied that the consort's period still hadn't come. She decided to prepare some *wenjing tang*, a concoction that aided blood flow, just in case. There were several other remedies that might help, but Maomao picked one with minimal side effects. She assumed Luomen would have some ready as well—how could he not, being so much more experienced than she was?—but she thought the consort might be less intimidated to receive the medicine from a fellow woman rather than a eunuch.

The carriage rolled through the palace grounds, stopping somewhere near the rear palace. They were in fact quite close to the pavilion where Anshi, the Empress Dowager, had once invited them.

Maomao put on the white overrobe, ignoring the heat, and got out of the carriage. She found herself facing a relatively small pavilion smack in the middle between the Empress Dowager's residence and that of the current Empress. It must have been put up long ago as a place for a royal consort to live, back before the rear palace had been established. As for the building in which the former emperor had spent so much of his time, which Maomao had visited the year before, it was long gone. She had to admit the place looked a little more barren without it.

Waiting in front of the pavilion was a physician with a benign look on his face and a cane in his hand. It was Luomen. "Ah, you're here," he said, dragging one leg as he came toward Maomao. They'd sent letters, but it had been nearly six months since they'd last seen each other.

Luomen was accompanied by two other men who appeared to be medical officials. Both were small and elderly, not at all threatening—perhaps that was simply how doctors tended to be, or maybe it was a gesture of consideration for Consort Lishu.

"This way, please," a woman said. It was one of Lishu's ladies-in-waiting from the rear palace. Maomao recognized her, but didn't know her name. The woman, though, clearly knew Maomao; one could catch an audible *tsk* from her. Apparently, attitudes among Lishu's women hadn't improved—maybe they had even gotten worse.

"This way," the woman reiterated and then led them on what seemed to Maomao to be a very long, very circuitous route. They went up to the second floor, then the third, then to the innermost

room on the floor, before the woman said, “I’m ever so sorry. I forgot the mistress changed rooms.”

Is she that eager to make our lives difficult? Maomao wondered. The three physicians with her were all old men; maybe their mild looks caused the woman to take them lightly.

At length, Maomao and her companions were shown to the innermost chamber on the first floor of the pavilion, which looked like a perfectly typical room for a consort. Emphasis on *for a consort*: the furnishings were of a quality that your average commoner might never see in their whole lives.

Consort Lishu lay on a canopied bed, with her chief lady-in-waiting (who was also familiar) standing by her side looking quite distressed. Lishu briefly quailed at the sight of the male doctors (aged though they were), but seeing Maomao with them relaxed her —for a brief second, before she quailed again, for altogether different reasons.

Luomen said simply, “We assumed there might be concerns about us, so we brought a proxy,” and looked at Maomao.

Lishu was suspected of being pregnant—and even if she wasn’t, if anything had happened between her, a high consort, and a man who was not the Emperor, her life would be forfeit.

Not that I think that’s remotely likely. For one thing, she didn’t think anyone as transparent as Lishu could keep a secret like that for very long. Probably not from Maomao, and almost certainly not from Ah-Duo, who had been with her the entire trip. It was impossible to be absolutely positive, of course—but it seemed unlikely.

So it was that Maomao found herself standing in front of the terrified consort, flexing her fingers. The quickest and simplest solution would be to check whether Consort Lishu was intact—a task for which Maomao, raised in the pleasure quarter, was uniquely suited. She had all kinds of ways to know.

“Let’s hurry up and get this over with. That’ll be easiest for everyone,” Maomao said.

“What? Wait... N-No! Noooo!” Lishu wailed.

“You’re all right. I’ll be done before you can count the wood grains in your bed.”

“Done with wh—ahh! Eek!” The consort reached out desperately for her chief lady-in-waiting, but Maomao closed the curtain around the bed. As for the elderly physicians, they stood discreetly in a corner of the room with their backs turned.

For a while, the only sound was Lishu’s whimpering.

“She’s pure. Of course,” Maomao announced flatly, wiping her hands with a cloth. Lishu lay on the bed, completely drained, provoking consternation from her chief lady-in-waiting. It should have been fine—Maomao was a fellow woman; she’d even done something similar when assessing whether Empress Gyokuyou’s child was in breech; but evidently Maomao had been wrong to think a complete virgin would take the exam the same way as a woman who had already given birth. Lishu looked even more exhausted than the time they’d plucked out her hair in the bath.

“Maomao, you could stand to be more gentle,” Luomen said, although it was a little late for that. The other two physicians wore strained expressions as well.

Just when Maomao was thinking the job was over and she could relax and write up the paperwork, a woman’s voice said, “Excuse me.” The door opened, and three of Lishu’s ladies-in-waiting came in, flanking the consort’s former chief lady-in-waiting, the one who had been reprimanded by Jinshi. She looked like trouble, as usual, but today she seemed to have taken it to another level.

“Yes? Can we help you?” the current chief lady-in-waiting asked. She was technically the superior in this situation, but she’d started life as nothing more than a food taster, and she felt an understandable shock of fear when confronted by the woman who had previously held her position.

The former chief lady-in-waiting simply ignored her, turning instead to Maomao and the elderly physicians. “Were you able to ascertain the consort’s chastity?” she asked.

“Yes, we’ve just finished the examination,” Luomen said, whereupon the woman glanced toward Maomao.

“But *you* didn’t perform the examination, did you? It was that woman there. A known acquaintance of the consort. Don’t you see a problem here?” She seemed to be suggesting that Maomao might lie to protect Lishu—an attitude Maomao rightfully found irritating.

“Perhaps you’d like to join me in conducting a reexamination, then?” she said. “Maybe we should call a midwife too, just to be extra safe.”

Her idea provoked looks of distress—from Lishu and her chief lady-in-waiting. The consort looked like she might die of embarrassment if she were subjected to any more such humiliations.

The former chief lady-in-waiting, for her part, simply shook her head. It was almost like she thought she was the one in charge here—she’d certainly gotten more self-important since Maomao had seen her last. Before, at least she’d been willing to *pretend* to be deferential to the consort.

The reason for her arrogance soon became clear—she was holding it in her hand. “I must say, I *dearly* hoped it wouldn’t come to this—but I found this, and felt honor bound to bring it to your collective attention.” She put a piece of paper on the table. (Maomao couldn’t help noticing how crumpled it was.) “I confess, I couldn’t believe the consort would write such a thing!” The woman leaned dramatically—almost theatrically—against the table.

When Maomao saw what was written on the page, she could only frown.

“A love letter!” the former chief lady-in-waiting announced. “To someone who is *not* His Majesty!”

The page was covered in pretty, girlish characters—and a plenitude of sweet nothings and proclamations of love.

So that’s why she took us on the scenic route, Maomao thought, finally understanding why the attendant had led them to the wrong room before finally bringing them to Consort Lishu. She hadn’t been playing a nasty little joke—she’d been buying time.

The former chief lady-in-waiting called for an official who was outside the room. Maomao wasn’t sure why she would be so eager to do that—the consort’s infidelity would have consequences for her ladies-in-waiting as well. Above all, the question of whether the

letter was really Lishu's bothered Maomao, but the handwriting had already been examined and determined to be hers.

Maomao and the doctors were shooed out of the building before they had a chance to question the consort. It seemed the former chief lady had wanted to act before Maomao could do her examination, but the delaying tactic hadn't gained enough time for that. Instead, one might say, she'd resorted to force.

Maomao and her companions decided to go back to the palace medical office. Maomao was an outsider, while Luomen and his two fellow physicians were none of them forceful personalities. If they were ordered to leave, there was little they could do but leave. Maomao was determined to at least write up a report on her findings. The former chief lady-in-waiting had insisted that Maomao's word wasn't trustworthy, but that wasn't hers to judge. If nothing else, the doctors with her had seen Lishu's face, and they seemed to believe that Maomao was right.

"That was rather brazen," remarked Elderly Physician No. 1. He had a lanky frame that made one think of a barren tree.

"Yes! It was almost too much to watch," responded Elderly Physician No. 2, a portly man with fingers like sausages.

Luomen was hardly younger than the two other doctors, but as the newest member of the office, it was he who served the tea. Maomao got up to help him, but he sat her back down, insisting that she focus on writing.

"The rear palace has always had people like her, but it's always disappointing to realize that kind is still alive and well," said the first doctor.

"You said it!" said the second. "I'm not saying women are evil, just that some of them make a room a darker place. It's the same in the palace at large..."

Maomao cocked her head, surprised: they talked as if they'd been to the rear palace. "You're not eunuchs, are you, sirs?"

"No, we're not. We were in the rear palace, but we're not castrated—we got out of there before they got us."

"Back in the day, a doctor didn't have to be a eunuch to go to the rear palace. Although they did make you take a strange drug any time you visited."

Ah... Maomao remembered: the most notorious scandal in the rear palace had taken place decades ago when a doctor had gotten involved with a woman serving there and made her pregnant. Or at

least, that was the story—it had in fact been the doing of the former emperor, but the deed was pinned on the unfortunate physician, who was banished along with the child. Problem solved, as far as the bureaucracy was concerned.

These days, the old quack was the only doctor in the rear palace, but at the time of that incident, there had been many physicians serving there—naturally enough, as it hadn't been necessary to give up one's manhood in order to do it.

"Well and good for them. I was a little late making my exit, and here I am," Luomen said blandly as he placed teacups on a tray.

"It's your own fault, Xiaomen. You never think anything is urgent enough to rush about!" Elderly Physician No. 1 chuckled.

"That's right, but you sure helped us!" No. 2 chortled. They both seemed to be having a good time, while Luomen simply looked a bit bemused. What else could he do? From their attitudes to the affectionate nickname, it was clear they were old friends.

Elderly Physician No. 2 turned to Maomao. "So you're Xiaomen's adopted daughter, miss? So is that eccentric, L—"

Maomao's face began to contort until it took on an unabashed glare. The portly doctor quickly shut his mouth.

"Young ladies always have a few subjects they'd prefer to avoid. Let's respect that," the lanky doctor said astutely. Clearly, age had brought him wisdom. Most helpful.

"Getting back to the subject—so the rear palace has always had plenty of people like her?" Maomao asked.

"Yes. Chaotic elements." When the empress regnant had been in power, the women in the rear palace had been engaged in kicking each other down. Officials were selected, and selected frequently, on the basis of ability, and so the rear palace became a microcosm of the tension that pervaded the entire court. "And people say there were lots of spies too."

"Spies?"

Evidently, the endless battles amongst the consorts inspired them to start using maids in hopes of scrounging up inside information.

"Once in a while, even ladies-in-waiting would turn traitor," the physician said. A lady dissatisfied with her situation could easily be talked around, turned into a pawn in someone else's game. Or again, one might lean on the power of one's parents to exploit a weakness of the target's parents—and so the pecking order in the

rear palace could change with dizzying speed.

"It got exceptionally bad when the current Empress Dowager became pregnant. Women driven mad with jealousy even attempted to kill her."

"That's true! I don't know how she survived until the empress regnant took her under her protection," the other doctor said.

"It was all thanks to the astounding lady-in-waiting she had. She really knew how to handle herself—they say she even got the assassins to turn on their mistresses!"

What is this, a novel? Maomao thought, sipping her tea and looking unimpressed.

"Anyway, I haven't seen something so distasteful for a long time," the first doctor said.

This brought a question to Maomao's mind; she said, "From the way you're talking, it sounds like you think someone else in the rear palace is conspiring to bring down Consort Lishu."

"You think not? Why else would a person turn so spectacularly against the great lady she serves?"

It was a fair point—until now, the former chief lady-in-waiting had never gone beyond garden-variety harassment. This time, though, she was clearly bent on destroying the consort. If she was successful, Lishu would be banished from the rear palace, and her ladies-in-waiting would be out of a job. In fact, they would be lucky not to suffer the same punishment as their mistress.

"That almost seems too superficial," Maomao said.

Elderly Physicians Nos. 1 & 2 looked at each other. "If you're Xiaomen's daughter, I'm sure you're a very smart young woman. But not everyone is as careful and thoughtful as you," the lanky doctor said patiently.

"I understand that," Maomao said—but this was too much.

"People like that aren't thinking about the future—only about their pride. They might start by nettling someone they happen to dislike, but when there's pushback, it only makes them angrier."

"You don't think she would hesitate even a little? She's dealing with a high consort and she's only a lady-in-waiting."

"That's exactly it. If a person feels trampled on, it only takes someone to give them the smallest push, and they go tumbling—humans are funny that way." It was a simple way to make a spy.

"Ha ha ha, you do like those kinds of stories, don't you?" the pudgy doctor said, stuffing a bun into his face. "It's just like how

you said that 'White Immortal' everyone was talking about was an intelligence agent from another country."

Luomen sipped tea with a reserved smile on his face, but there was unmistakable sympathy for Consort Lishu in his eyes.

"Hey, don't worry about it. Once your girl submits the paperwork, the consort will be free and clear," the portly physician said, obviously able to tell exactly how Luomen was feeling.

"But that love letter," Luomen said, his worry not assuaged.

"Oh, that. Girls her age write letters like that all the time. What's the problem with letting a little fancy take you? I know, I know—it's embarrassing, for sure, and it's a problem coming from a high consort. But you just say she was practicing writing to His Majesty, and the trouble goes away. Maybe she did write that letter—but she didn't send it, did she? All the consorts' letters are supposed to be checked by the censor, anyway."

"Yes, they're supposed to be..." Maomao said. But she was concerned by just how confident the former chief lady-in-waiting had acted.

"Say, Maomao," Luomen began, glancing outside.

"Yes?"

"There's a certain someone who always shows up about this hour, claiming it's snack time. Are you sure you should be here?"

At that, Maomao promptly drained her tea. At the very same moment, she heard a weird old man whistling outside. She lost not a second getting her things together and opening the window opposite the entrance. "I'll see myself out, then," she said.

"You're an odd one," said one of the two Elderly Physicians, but neither of them tried to stop her; they were too busy preparing for the storm that was about to hit.

The exact same moment Maomao landed on the ground outside, there was a great *slam* as the door flew open. "Uncle! I've brought some *ji dan gao*! You'll join me, won't you?"

The man announcing his snack was none other than the monocled freak, and his entrance left Maomao with absolutely no reason to stick around any longer.

I'm still not sure, though...

Would Lishu's trouble really be over now? The question made her uneasy. She hoped there was nothing bigger going on—but Maomao's bad feelings had a tendency to be right.

Chapter 13: Scandal (Part One)

Some days later, Sazen came to her with an unsettling story. He appeared at the shop, his face drawn, saying he wanted to talk. Maomao wondered what he could want to talk about, but it turned out to be none other than Consort Lishu.

"If a rear palace consort had been meeting secretly with a man, would she be put to death?"

The question came completely out of the blue, and Maomao could only muster a befuddled "Huh?"

Sazen seemed to take her response as vaguely insulting; he stomped on the floor and said, "Would she or wouldn't she? I'm an ignorant bumpkin; just tell me!" His gaze was piercing. Maomao realized her reaction hadn't been ideal. Sazen, she knew, had once served the Shi clan, and while he had no loyalty to his former masters, she suspected he had some attachment to Loulan.

"I guess that would be sort of unavoidable in cases of infidelity, wouldn't it? An ordinary palace lady might be one thing, but this is a consort you're talking about. *Why* are you talking about it, though? What brought this on?"

Sazen pursed his lips and wouldn't quite look at her. "I heard about it at the market—they say the Emperor is preparing to subdue another clan."

"Is it the U clan, by any chance?"

"No idea. But I heard it was because of a high consort who's only sixteen years old."

Maomao didn't say anything to that, but she wished she could put her head in her hands. If even Sazen had heard about this situation, probably everyone in the capital had. She'd been sure to be explicit in her report that Consort Lishu was innocent. Whatever the consort's former chief lady-in-waiting might be pulling, Maomao had tried to tell herself that it wouldn't amount to much. But it sounded like she'd been wrong.

Normally, she might send a letter to Jinshi and simply wait for him to do something about it, but there wasn't time for that now.

“H-Hey!” Sazen cried when she jumped up.

“I’m going to need you to watch the shop for a bit.”

“What, again?!”

Maomao hurried out and toward the northern side of the capital. That was where the palace was—along with a whole district of high-class homes. One of them was one of His Majesty’s villas, home to Ah-Duo, herself a former high consort.

“Is Lady Ah-Duo in?” Maomao asked the guard, even though she knew he wouldn’t simply grant her admittance.

“Do you have an official appointment, miss?” the guard asked. The fact that he was willing to speak so politely to a mere apothecary—and not a particularly well-dressed one at that—was probably because he remembered Maomao from her other visits here. But that wouldn’t be enough to gain her admission.

“I’m afraid I don’t, sir, but I simply must see Lady Ah-Duo.”

“Sorry, rules are rules. I can’t just let you in,” the guard said, looking genuinely apologetic. It briefly occurred to Maomao to try to force her way past him while he was busy feeling sorry for her, but she knew all too well that it would only end with her under arrest.

“Might I at least ask you to take her a message for me?”

“I’m afraid she’s not here right now...”

Maomao made a face like she had bitten down on something particularly bitter. If she was just going to let herself be sent home, she might as well not have come at all.

I wonder if Suirei’s here, she thought, but then dismissed the idea. Suirei wasn’t officially supposed to exist. She wouldn’t meet Maomao alone, and even if she did, she probably lacked any authority to summon Ah-Duo.

“Might I be allowed to wait?” Maomao asked, determined to stay there until Ah-Duo returned.

It was something like an hour later that a carriage arrived at the villa. The guard was kind enough to alert Maomao, who was sitting in the shade of a tree as she waited. She jumped to her feet and ran over to the vehicle; Ah-Duo’s face appeared in the window.

“Well, this is a surprise. I always took you to be a bit cooler-headed than this,” Ah-Duo said—and it was true that a few years ago, Maomao probably wouldn’t have come personally to Ah-Duo like this. She would have borne in mind that the palace had its own

ways of maintaining its equilibrium, and that the Emperor seemed especially considerate toward Lishu such that nothing too terrible could happen to her.

At that moment, though, in her mind's eye, Lishu seemed to overlap with the lady of the annihilated Shi clan. Maybe that was what had made her uncommonly emotional about this.

"Let's talk inside," Ah-Duo said. "I'm sure you must be thirsty after such a long wait out in this heat."

"Thank you, milady," Maomao said, bowing deeply, and then they entered the villa.

"So there are already rumors in the marketplace. News traveled faster than I expected." Ah-Duo sat with her legs and arms both crossed. On anyone else, the posture might have looked imperious, but for her it seemed oddly fitting and not at all offensive. A lady-in-waiting had served them tea, yet she had disappeared almost without Maomao noticing. Maomao had thought Suirei, at least, might be present, but there was no sign of her.

Hesitantly, she said, "May I take it from your tone, milady, that the rumors are true?"

"What's true is that at the moment she's confined to a separate pavilion," Ah-Duo said. The consort was not, strictly speaking, being treated as a criminal, but she was still effectively under arrest.

"Have you had an opportunity to speak with Consort Lishu?"

"I have," Ah-Duo replied. She told Maomao that Lishu insisted she hadn't written any love letter—but also, Ah-Duo added, the letter in question clearly was written by Lishu.

That gave Maomao pause. "Don't those things contradict each other?"

"They don't. It seems the text in question was copied out of a novel."

So that's it. The novels the palace women loved so much were full of tales of romance—parts of which might happen to look just like a love letter if one found them in isolation.

"The consort was quite shocked. She says she was copying the story for a palace woman she'd recently become friends with."

Maomao cast her eyes to the ground. Lishu had believed that, slowly but surely, she was gaining some allies.

A woman who couldn't write was likely a woman of low rank.

By writing out the story, Lishu had been trying, in her own somewhat awkward way, to make friends. Copying out a text might seem a mundane enough thing, but it would have taken considerable time and effort—and because Lishu was doing it and asking nothing in return, she might well have imagined it would deepen the friendship between her and this other woman. She must have been very happy with the idea.

Only to find herself betrayed, Maomao thought. Or had the other woman approached the consort with that in mind all along? Whichever, it was all very underhanded.

"Couldn't you provide a copy of the book she was working from?"

"The thing about that is...every book that enters the rear palace goes through the censors, who keep a copy on hand for reference. But nothing they have matches this text."

"You mean it didn't go through their office?"

"Mmhm. Someone smuggled it in."

Well, now. That was a problem. Still something nagged at Maomao. "What happened to the woman who asked the consort to copy the book? Where is she? For that matter, how did a woman who can't read get her hands on a book that had bypassed the censors, anyway?"

"Supposing the woman is already gone?" Ah-Duo said. While Consort Lishu had been on her trip, about a hundred women had reached the end of their terms of service and left the rear palace. This mystery woman had been one of them.

"And after she left?"

"We looked, naturally. But we never found her. It's not like she was officially attending upon the consort, anyway. They seem to have gotten to know each other when the woman did odd jobs at the consort's request. Even if we found her, she could just play dumb. She may have been doing everything with one eye on the end of her contract."

If this was, in fact, a premeditated crime, it would have been difficult for the woman to pull off on her own. Maomao tried to think over what she knew. One thing was certain: if a high consort like Lishu had started getting friendly with a menial maid, her critics wouldn't have stayed silent about it—least of all her former chief lady-in-waiting.

So a palace lady nearing the end of her term of service had

approached Consort Lishu to copy out a romantic text from a book. That book happened to be one the censors hadn't seen or approved. Something a lowly, illiterate maid would never normally possess.

"I'm thinking that some other person used the maid to convince the consort to write out the passage, but what's your opinion, Lady Ah-Duo?" Maomao asked. She didn't like to work based entirely on her own assumptions; she hoped Ah-Duo could back up her intuition.

"I agree," Ah-Duo said—but then she added, "Consort Lishu's lady claimed she found the 'letter' in the consort's room, but it was actually found somewhere else—somewhere outside the rear palace."

"Had it actually been sent to some lordling somewhere?"

If it had still been in Lishu's chambers, then it would be easy enough to claim she was going to send it to the Emperor: problem solved. But if it was already in the possession of some other man, then it was hard to blame them for treating her as unfaithful.

"Yes, unfortunately. That's why it's such a big issue and why she's under lock and key now. The man in question is the son of a servant, someone who's met the consort several times throughout her life. He denies any involvement, but the letter was found at his house."

The man could protest his innocence all he wanted; finding evidence like that at his own estate was pretty damning. Apparently the former chief lady-in-waiting had claimed that there had been something between this man and the consort when she had returned from the nunnery to the rear palace, and she had been most insistent the man be investigated. She had Consort Lishu all tied up with a pretty bow.

But that doesn't make any sense!

"How did she even send the letter? I thought the censors checked everything, even letters home," Maomao said. That was why on one occasion, someone had tried to use chemicals infused in the wooden writing strips as a code, and why Empress Gyokuyou's letters to her family were so roundabout in communicating the information they contained.

"The letter was folded very small. It must have been tucked among some items she was sending home, for the boy to get it first."

It wasn't impossible. But something felt off.

Maybe Maomao felt so muddled and confused because it was Ah-Duo telling her all this. What she really wanted was to hear the story firsthand.

"Do you think anyone could possibly get me an interview with Consort Lishu, or even with this young man?" she asked.

At that exact moment, someone knocked on the door, and a servant hesitantly showed his face.

"What is it?" Ah-Duo asked, and the servant looked at Maomao as if he was unsure what to do.

"A Master Basen is here asking after Lady Maomao."

It was as if he'd been waiting for his cue.

Basen offered only the most perfunctory of greetings to Ah-Duo before he dragged Maomao off.

"If I may ask, sir, what in the world do you think you're doing?" Maomao inquired. Basen had come on horseback, begrudging even a carriage, and the two of them stood out like a sore thumb as they worked their way through the city, Maomao clinging on behind him. She did at least have a cloth to cover her face.

"You heard about Consort Lishu?" he said.

"Yes..."

"Then you must have figured it out. You must have some way to show her innocence." Maomao thought she understood what Basen was saying, but something still bothered her. "I can't meet her myself. I was told to find a proxy," he said.

A woman under suspicion of infidelity would certainly find it difficult to meet with a man, true enough. Much as Basen couldn't have been more of a lifesaver for her, Maomao decided to tweak the headstrong man. "You were told. By Jinshi?" she asked.

"I'm...using my own judgment."

"Oh, I see."

Yes, something did bother Maomao—but as she didn't wish to upset the person in control of the horse, she kept it to herself for the time being.

Consort Lishu had been relocated from the pavilion she'd occupied a few days before. That building had been not unlike the one she had in the rear palace, showing that she was still being treated as her station merited—but now she had been moved to the western part of the city, and her residence was less a palace than a

tower. It looked something like a pagoda one might see at a temple, but on a larger scale, six stories tall with several overlapping roofs, and although it was somewhat lacking in color, that only made it look all the more imposing. The impression was reinforced by the ring of gigantic trees surrounding the place. Truly impressive, as buildings went—yet rather poor quarters for a royal consort. The burly men standing guard at the entrance didn't make it any more inviting.

"During the time of the empress regnant, a powerful courtier who turned against her was brought here, on the pretext of having an incurable illness," Basen informed Maomao. "They claimed they'd brought him here to attempt a new medical procedure. It's the same place the former emperor's brothers were brought when they contracted the illness that killed them. All of them met their ends in this tower."

So this place has a history. Maomao was about to say it out loud, but she refrained. The sad tale somehow robbed the place of its gravity, turning it instead into nothing more than a gloomy prison. *Did His Majesty order this?* she wondered. She'd always believed he was partial to Lishu, in his own way.

"If we can just find a way to undermine their evidence, she could get out of here," Basen said. What he meant was, he wanted Maomao to talk to the consort and find the truth.

Luckily for him, Maomao wanted the same thing.

There was, however, one thing she had to be sure of first. She pulled aside the cloth over her head so that she could look him square in the eye and said, "I'm going to do what you ask, Master Basen, because I share your objection to Consort Lishu's treatment."

Maomao did feel compassion, once in a while. She'd originally taken Lishu for nothing more than an unpleasant little princess, but as she saw misfortune befall the young woman again and again, she had come to sympathize with her. Surely no one could blame Maomao for trying to do a little something to help the consort. At the rear palace, Maomao had been then-Consort Gyokyou's woman, and so she couldn't be too vociferous in support of Lishu—but now she didn't have that concern.

What about Basen, though?

"Do I understand correctly that we're doing this not on Master Jinshi's orders, but at your own discretion?" she asked.

"You do."

“And what motivates this behavior, sir?” It was the obvious thing to ask. So obvious, in fact, that she hadn’t been able to ask it even though it was on her mind.

“Who wouldn’t want to help an innocent consort in trouble?” Basen said.

“How do you know she’s innocent?” Maomao said flatly. Lishu and Basen had only just met on their recent trip. They’d seen each other at the banquet, true enough, but they hadn’t had a chance to talk. And otherwise there had been few opportunities for them to even see each other’s faces during the journey—the only time they were face-to-face was when the lion attacked. Again, they had hardly spoken to each other even then; for the most part, Basen simply peppered Maomao with questions about Lishu. Now he was acting to help this young woman with no official orders, entirely on his own. Why?

I wish he wouldn’t.

There were people in the world who did something extraordinarily tiresome: fall in love at first sight. They would completely ignore personality and social status, feeling love well up, as it were, at nothing more than a person’s appearance. Maomao was quite certain: at that moment, Basen was operating under the influence of exactly such irksome feelings. True, she’d known him to get a little emotional from time to time, but for the most part Basen was quite aware of his place as Jinshi’s attendant. A place of which acting on his own volition to prove Lishu’s innocence was emphatically not a part.

All this being the case, Maomao wished to be very clear about one thing: “Even if we establish the consort’s innocence, the best you can hope for is that *she returns to the rear palace*.”

“Yes... I know that.”

She was a flower blooming on a peak so high he would never reach it as long as he lived. Would recognizing that be enough to put the matter to rest for him?

“If you mean that, sir, then very well.” There were still many things Maomao wished she could say, but she decided to stop there. She was no more eager than anyone to stick her nose into such subjects.

It happened with customers sometimes: they’d go head over heels for a courtesan the first time they saw her, and come to the brothel constantly, spending every coin they had on the woman.

But when the money dried up, so did the love, and men who didn't understand that would vilify the suddenly distant and uninterested courtesan, ridicule her, sometimes even become enraged and try to kill her. There's little more unsettling than a man laughing uproariously over a blood-soaked bedroom.

If they were going to fall in love with a woman hiding the bags under her eyes with makeup, bags inflicted by a lack of sleep from entertaining customers all night long, you would hope they could at least be true to that love. If they didn't realize what they were getting, then it was their own fault for being so ready to give their hearts.

Maomao looked at Basen, silently begging him not to be one of those men.

"I know," Basen said, as much to himself as to her. The words sounded heavy in his mouth, and Maomao continued to fix him with a severe look as they entered the prison.

"Are you well, milady?" Maomao asked Consort Lishu, though she knew she couldn't possibly be very well. When they had been admitted to the tower, they'd been given a wooden strip with the time written on it and told they were free to speak with Lishu until the next bell tolled.

The tower was of rather unusual construction, with a staircase and hallways winding around the outside while the interior was entirely devoted to individual rooms. Lishu's quarters occupied two simple, adjoining rooms on the third floor; Maomao wondered if there might be people on the floors above, but it seemed not.

Lishu nodded, her face pale. Her chief lady-in-waiting was beside her, but as far as Maomao could see, she had no other attendants. The room itself was well appointed for a criminal's cell, but for a member of the nobility, it must have been an acute embarrassment.

I wonder how many people have gone mad and died in this room, Maomao thought, but she knew better than to say it out loud—she would only cause even more blood to drain from Lishu's face. Instead she asked, "May I inquire whether your monthly visitor has come?"

"Yes...finally," Lishu said, glancing at the ground in embarrassment. That didn't necessarily mean she would be feeling physically better, but it did offer the consolation that she wouldn't

have to be subject to further examinations by anyone else on the grounds that Maomao's work was suspect. It at least demonstrated conclusively that she wasn't pregnant.

"Would you tell me what kind of relationship you have with the man who had the letter?"

"It's not a letter. It's just something I copied," the consort said. Maomao chose to take this as a denial of any involvement with the man, however weak the terms might have been. "He's the son of a servant. All he did was babysit me a few times when I was little. The last time I saw him was at the mansion when I came back from the nunnery. My nursemaid told me he was a very serious, grown-up person."

None of this sounded like Lishu was lying; Maomao was inclined to believe the consort.

"I never sent him any letters, and the only reason I sent anything home at all was because they sent His Majesty a gift, and he thought they should be sent something in return. I wouldn't send them anything myself. The closest thing I get to a letter from them is when word comes from my father via my nursemaid."

The irony of the situation was that it had made Lishu far more talkative than usual. Each time her eyes met Maomao's, however, she would look away again. That was normal enough for her, and Maomao paid it no mind. "I've heard the letter was tucked among a delivery to your family. Do you think such a thing is possible?" she asked.

"It's impossible to say," answered, not Lishu, but her chief lady-in-waiting. "Most of what Lady Lishu sends home to her family are gifts from His Majesty. Someone from her household is supposed to come pick them up immediately after the rear palace has finished processing the goods."

There was no stipulation about *who* would come to pick them up—but it seemed to have been this servant's son. In other words, nothing could be proven, but nothing could be disproven either. If Lishu's former chief lady were intent on discrediting her, it would be natural to look into the matter.

"And there's no sign that the former chief lady-in-waiting herself sent anything to anyone?" Maomao asked, but Lishu and her current chief lady both shook their heads.

"I know at least that she didn't send anything after I wrote out that copy," Lishu said. If the imperious former chief lady hadn't sent

anything, her lackeys wouldn't have been able to either. Records were kept of such things in the rear palace, anyway, and so would have been easy enough to check. How, then, had Lishu's handwritten copy gotten into the young man's house?

"She claims this 'letter' was packed with the shipment, but I'm having trouble imagining how it actually got in there," Maomao said. It wouldn't have been possible to physically wrap anything with that paper. Maybe it had been put in among the packing material used to prevent breakage?

"Apparently it was rolled up tightly, almost like a string. The paper we saw was very dirty and awfully tattered," the chief lady replied.

"Is that right..."

That would make the whole job easier for the culprit. Even if the wrong person got the letter, they wouldn't know what was inside it; they would think it was a piece of string and treat it accordingly. So what if they threw it away? It would be simple enough to retrieve. In fact, anyone in Consort Lishu's household could reasonably be expected to do so.

"Did anything change after you wrote that text out?"

The consort and her chief lady looked at each other. Both cocked their heads quizzically, as if to say—well, yes and no. They couldn't quite remember.

Suppose for the sake of argument that the former chief lady-in-waiting really was the criminal here (the evidence certainly seemed to be mounting). Even if so, it would be a difficult ploy to pull off solo. She must have had an accomplice outside the rear palace. How had they communicated with each other?

We can worry about that later, Maomao told herself. They were running out of time, and there was something else she wanted to ask. "One more thing, then," she said, and pulled out some paper and a portable writing set. "This novel the maid asked you to copy. Would you write down as much about it as you remember?" She immediately began grinding the ink.

○●○

"Wouldn't you like some tea, Lady Lishu?" the consort's chief lady-in-waiting, Kanan, asked. As she had been asking. As she kept asking. But Lishu shook her head. She had nothing to do but drink

tea, but she felt like if she drank any more, her belly would turn to mush.

Kanan was the only lady-in-waiting there with Lishu. One lady was enough, under the circumstances; but the humiliating thing was that Lishu had never specifically been told not to bring her other women. Only Kanan had been willing to follow her here.

Lishu had been starting to think she was finally getting a little closer to some of her other ladies-in-waiting, but apparently that had been a delusion. Particularly so when it came to the maid for whom Lishu had copied out a novel because the girl couldn't read herself—and on whose account Lishu was now considered a criminal. It was enough to make her want to cry, but crying would do nothing but make life harder for Kanan, the one person who had actually stayed with her.

Here in her tower Lishu had no particular amusements, not even any windows; no way to pass the time. Her two choices were eating or sleeping. Virtually no light made it into her room, such that even in the middle of the day it was necessary to light candles to see by, and the constant clinging gloom only made her depression worse.

The only people who had come to visit her were the apothecary (the one who had once served in the rear palace herself), and Lishu's father Uryuu, one solitary time. Lishu had been sent to this tower immediately after Ah-Duo had come, so she didn't expect to see the former consort for a while. As for her father, his only question had been, "So you really *didn't* pull that ridiculous stunt?"

"No, sir," Lishu had answered weakly. It had been all she was able to muster. The apothecary had proven that Uryuu was in fact her real father, but such long-standing grudges didn't instantly dissipate in real life the way they did in plays. Her father might finally believe she was his daughter, but he had other children. He'd rejected her mother; why should he suddenly feel any warmth for the daughter he'd had with her? Lishu had known perfectly well that things had been unlikely to change, yet it grieved her to be confronted with the reality.

"I'm going to clean these up, then, milady," Kanan said, collecting the tea implements and taking them out of the room. There was nowhere to get water in Lishu's chambers, so any washing had to be done on a lower floor. Kanan was allowed some mobility, but Lishu was required to stay on the third floor. If she

ever went downstairs, it was only with the permission of her guard.

Lishu sighed and stretched out across her table. The old building creaked and cracked every time she moved. The upper levels seemed to be in an even worse state, and Lishu sometimes worried that one day the ceiling might come clean off.

It seemed to her that there was someone else locked up here besides her. Because the staircase wound around the outside of the building, getting to the upper levels required passing the rooms on the lower floors, and several times each day, someone—someone who wasn't Lishu or Kanan—took the stairs going up. Kanan reported that this person would be carrying food or changes of clothes, so there must have been someone up there in the same situation as Lishu.

She had no way of finding out who it was, though—and even if she did, it was possible she would discover she had been better off not knowing.

With nothing else really to do, Lishu thought she might try to sleep a little, but then she heard a noise from above her. She looked at the ceiling in surprise. It was an old building; there must be some mice around. But one does grow anxious when one is in a dimly lit room by oneself. Lishu was so frightened, in fact, that she thought she might try to step outside.

Tump, tump, tump. Mice didn't have footsteps like that. Lishu was still frightened, but now she was also strangely intrigued. The sounds seemed to be coming from above the next room, so Lishu took the cover from her bed and, draping it over her head, peeked cautiously through the door.

"Y-You're just a little mouse, right? Say 'squeak'!"

It was a silly request. Before, back when Lishu had been ignorant of the mockery of her ladies-in-waiting, she had taken an imperious attitude with maids who came to her pavilion, frequently issuing just such childish demands. She'd been told that you had to assert yourself with these lowly types so that they knew their place, and she had believed it uncritically. No wonder the maids hadn't liked her—she couldn't do anything for herself, yet she went around giving orders.

The muffled thumping stopped, but just as Lishu was letting out a sigh of relief, there was a tremendous crash, accompanied by a tinkling sound of something breaking. Lishu was so startled she fell flat on her behind.

And then she heard much more than a squeak.
"*Hello?*" a voice said. "*Is someone there?*"

Chapter 14: Scandal (Part Two)

“Do you recall any books like this?” Maomao asked, showing the summary Lishu had written to the old man who ran the bookstore. She’d tried to get Lishu to write down the gist of the story and some of her impressions of it; they hadn’t had time for more. Unfortunately, among the things Lishu hadn’t been able to remember about the book had been the title. She had only been copying out the part the maid had asked for, and she’d given the rest of the book only a cursory read.

There wasn’t much Maomao could do. To prove that the incriminating “letter” was actually a manuscript of a book, they would have to find the book it had been copied from. Lishu told them that the book she’d been given was handwritten, not printed, but it had had an attractive cover, suggesting that perhaps it was a product for sale, just one with a small distribution.

“Hrm... Looks like your average love story to me, not that I pay much attention to that sort of thing.”

“I have to think you at least flip through whatever you stock.”

“Ahh, there are so many books these days. And my eyes aren’t what they used to be.” The bookseller yawned. He was virtually retired now; his son handled the bulk of the business. He obviously wanted Maomao to hurry up and go home so he could take a nap.

He wasn’t wrong that the story sounded like a bog-standard romance, but it had a political edge to it, the sort of thing that would have gotten the attention of the censors. The story went that a young man and a young woman from rival noble families fell in love with each other at first sight, and then yadda yadda yadda it ended in tragedy.

Maomao pressed a hand to her forehead—this wasn’t getting her anywhere. There were two other bookstores in the capital, both smaller than this one. She might even end up having to go to booksellers in other cities.

Her fretting was interrupted by a man who came in bearing a sizable load on his back. “Hullo,” he said to Maomao.

“Ah, you’re back,” the old man said—this must be his son.

“What are you doing, Dad?” the younger man asked, setting down his load and giving the elder a dubious look. “You’re not acting like the customers are just a nuisance again, are you?” The man knew his father well.

“She was pestering me about whether I recognized this one book. I don’t read every damn page that comes through here, you know!”

“Let me see,” the shopkeeper’s son said, taking Lishu’s summary and squinting at it. “Oh, this one…”

He knelt down and rifled through the bundle he’d brought, coming up with one particular book. The cover depicted a young man and a young woman, but something seemed a little odd about the picture.

He passed the book to Maomao, and she immediately began reading. Even just skimming the pages, it was obvious that it resembled the story Lishu had described. Then she stopped on one particular page. “This here…” she said. It was very similar to a passage Lishu had written from memory. Similar—but some of the details were different, the exact words were different. The meaning was almost identical, however.

“Yeah, there are some odd things in there, huh? They say it’s a translation of a play that’s real popular in the west.”

“A play? The west?”

“Sure. Some of the descriptions sound a little funny, right? Whoever translated it didn’t know what the world looked like to nobles all the way over there, so they changed names and customs and stuff to sound like ones we have here. Then each person who copied it made more changes to suit themselves.”

That prompted Maomao to look again at the consort’s summary. Lishu had included the name of one of the main characters, and it had nagged at Maomao, because it didn’t sound like a normal name. Now she realized it was a western name, transliterated directly into their language using arbitrary characters.

She flipped the pages of the book again, searching for that unusual name, but she couldn’t find it. She did, though, find another very similar passage—albeit one that used perfectly ordinary names.

“Huh. I wonder if she was reading some earlier copy of this book. This one is supposed to be pretty old, though,” the son said.

“Where can I get a copy of this?” Maomao asked.

“I bought it from the copyist. I think they said they got it in last summer. We’re hoping to print it, though, so if you’re going to go try to buy one now, we’ll chase you out.”

In other words, Consort Lishu had most likely used a copy that had been in circulation prior to the previous summer. Maomao stopped cold: hadn’t something else happened in the rear palace right about then?

“The caravan...”

“Hm? What’s that?”

“The girl does like to talk to herself, doesn’t she?” the old bookseller remarked. He and his son both peered at Maomao, but she had other things on her mind.

The caravan would have been able to bring translated books from the west. And the cargo wouldn’t have been inspected very closely, as they had discovered from the trouble with the abortifacients just after the caravan’s visit. It would have been easy to procure a book or two while the upper consorts’ ladies-in-waiting did their shopping.

“So, what?” Maomao said. “Someone just happens to stumble on this book in the caravan’s wares, buys it, and then tries to use it to bring her down? What about the letter, then? Was there someone on the inside?”

“I don’t have the faintest idea what you’re babbling about. You’re a strange one...”

“Dad, be nice.”

Maomao thought hard, ignoring the conversation, but she couldn’t put the pieces together, not now.

“Give me this,” she said, thrusting the book at the shopkeeper.

“Ten silver pieces,” the old man wheezed, looking at his feet.

“That’s robbery! This isn’t some fancy picture scroll. It’s got a crappy cover, mistakes everywhere—it’s like the copyist turned it out overnight!” Maomao wasn’t stupid enough to just pay what he asked.

“No, Dad, it’s not for sale at all! We’re going to use that to print from!” the son said, stepping between Maomao and his father.

“Two silver pieces! Fair compromise?” Maomao said.

“Nine silver. And a half.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not for sale!”

Some thirty minutes of squabbling later, Maomao obtained the

book for six silver pieces and left the store with the son looking balefully after her.

○●○

Another day was starting. Another day of nothing but eating and sleeping.

"How about this robe today, Lady Lishu?" Kanan asked, holding up a blue outfit. It was one of Lishu's favorites, but she was so depressed, she couldn't muster the enthusiasm to pick out clothes.

"Okay. That's fine," she said. She was too tired to tell Kanan to bring something different. Once she was changed, Kanan got breakfast ready. Water was on the floor below Lishu's, but food was prepared in an entirely separate location. Kanan appeared to make every effort to hurry back with Lishu's meals, but they had always gone cold by the time she arrived, and Lishu would find herself sipping lukewarm soup.

"I'm going out for a moment, then," Kanan said. She left the room, and Lishu could hear her going down the stairs. There would be nothing to do until she got back—but these past few days, those moments hadn't felt empty.

"*Lishu, are you there?*" asked the voice from the next room. Lishu, clutching her pillow, went into the other room and sat down, leaning against a chest of drawers. Still holding her pillow, she gazed up at the ceiling. There was a funny little pipe poking through one of the various holes that had developed in the dilapidated woodwork. The halls and stairways, through which everyone had to pass, were kept in decent condition, but it didn't seem time had been taken to check over every room carefully.

"I'm here, Sotei," Lishu called. In response, an aroma wafted down through the ceiling—at once sweet and bitter, it was most unusual. At first it had seemed very strange to Lishu, but it had become a source of comfort. No doubt it was some perfume the person above her wore.

That person was a young woman, like Lishu, and like Lishu, she was trapped in this tower for reasons beyond her control. She said her name was Sotei, and she had first spoken to Lishu a few days earlier. Her voice was wispy and frail, but she'd succeeded in pulling away a rotten part of the floor, breaking through the weakened ceiling, and pushing that pipe into Lishu's room. She was

obviously a far, far stronger person than Lishu.

The consort had been surprised—in fact, terrified—the first time she'd heard the voice from overhead, but once she realized the speaker was neither a mouse nor a ghost, but a young woman her own age, Lishu opened up to her with surprising speed. If there was one thing Lishu had plenty of, it was time to kill. Before she knew what she was doing, she had told Sotei her name—but to her relief, there had been no particular reaction. Maybe Sotei didn't know who Lishu was.

"*I wonder what they'll serve today*," Sotei said.

"Yesterday was five-flavor congee, so I hope we get chicken and egg today. I wish they would stop with all the shellfish..."

It was so strange how, lacking anything else to do, simply eating became an entertainment in its own right.

"*That's right, you can't have seafood, can you? But it's so good!*"

"There's some I can have. But I always feel funny about it..."

Almost equally odd to Consort Lishu was how she never felt lost for words with Sotei. Maybe it was because they couldn't actually see each other.

Lishu had never specifically asked why Sotei was here in the pagoda, but when Lishu said she'd been locked up on vague charges, Sotei volunteered that she was in much the same situation.

"*There's really nothing to do around here, is there? All free time and nothing to fill it*," Sotei said.

"You're telling me. I've never been more sensitive to the sound of footsteps in my life."

"*I know what you mean! You know who it has to be—it's the sound of your meal arriving, and you act like it!*"

"What gluttons!" Lishu said, and she heard giggling in response. "You have very good ears, Sotei. You must have heard me down here—that's why you talked to me." Notwithstanding the aging structure, catching a voice from the floor below would have demanded pretty decent hearing. Lishu hardly even heard anything that was going on above her.

"*That's true, I guess my hearing is pretty good. For example, I can tell someone is coming up the stairs right now.*"

Lishu focused and listened, and indeed, she heard footsteps approaching. She was sure it must be Kanan, but the steps went straight by her chambers, continuing upward.

"*Hold on a second*," Sotei said. She left for a moment, and there

was some clattering as she came back. "*Ooh, that's hot! Sorry to break it to you, but it's seafood congee today.*"

"Ugh. What's in it?"

"*I think this is dried shrimp. And this might be a little bit of pork, here...*"

"I guess I can eat that stuff..." They were hardly her favorites, but she could either eat them or starve to death. If she pitched a fit about the food, she would only make life harder for Kanan.

Speaking of Kanan, Lishu thought, she was late. How long did it take to get breakfast? Sotei's was already here. In fact, Kanan had seemed to be taking her time the past several days, Lishu had noticed—but when Kanan got back, Lishu's conversations with Sotei had to stop, so the consort had been willing to overlook the delays.

From the little pipe in the ceiling, Lishu could hear Sotei eating. She claimed she didn't have any ladies-in-waiting to speak of with her, but someone must have brought the food in a hurry if the congee was still hot.

"*Hey, Lishu, want to know something?*"

"What?"

"*It's about this floor.*" Lishu was on the third floor of the pagoda, with Sotei above her on the fourth. From the outside, it had looked as if the tower might be ten stories or more. "*They say nothing above the fourth floor has been used in decades, so it's even more broken down than our levels. You have to go by guards on the way down, but because no one uses those higher floors, there's no one to stop you from going up.*"

"Wow, really?"

"*Really. Maybe it's because you can't escape from the upper levels.*"

There were windows around the outside of the tower, but even if one could break them and go through, there was still the height to consider. Lishu, at least, didn't think she could get a ladder to help her climb down, nor did she wish to try. Such a conspicuous breakout attempt would never escape the attention of the guards.

The bigger problem, though, was that even if Lishu managed to get out, there was nowhere she could go. She kept waiting and hoping that Lady Ah-Duo might visit her, but the former consort had never come to the tower. It had hardly been a full ten days since their last meeting, though, and Lishu knew it would be petulant to speak of the issue.

Neither had there been any contact from the apothecary or

Lishu's father. It was easy enough to say that it hadn't been that long, but every day that passed heightened Lishu's anxiety. If she hadn't had Sotei to talk to, she thought she might have lost it already.

"*I've got an idea. Want to try going to the upper floors?*"

That suggestion, at that particular moment, sent a shock through Lishu's heart. "What? What do you mean, the upper floors?"

"*The guard between the third and fourth floors is changed three times every day. The guard on duty goes down to summon the next person, and for those few minutes, there's no one there. They don't change all the guards at once, of course, so you can't go downstairs—but you could go up. Me, I could do it any time. There's no one above the fourth floor.*"

She could go upstairs.

"*We could see the whole capital from up there. Why not take a look? What's the harm?*"

Lishu didn't say anything right away. As Sotei's words drifted down to her, they were accompanied by that almost-sweet, almost-bitter smell. Lishu felt she would very much like to see the capital, but as yet she didn't take a single step. "I have a lady-in-waiting with me," she said. "If I disappeared, she would notice right away."

"*You haven't told her about me. Why's that?*"

Lishu found that question hard to answer. A voice from the ceiling seemed like a tricky thing to explain, and she was afraid Kanan would try to make her stop talking to Sotei.

"*Are you worried what she'd think about it? Her, an attendant who leaves you alone while she enjoys being free of this tower?*"

Lishu felt a chill run down her spine, but she couldn't deny what Sotei was saying. Lishu knew perfectly well that there was only one of Kanan, her chief lady-in-waiting, and she couldn't be with Lishu constantly all day, every day. And yet, even at this very moment, wasn't she out there, savoring the open air, while Lishu languished here?

The consort shook her head vigorously, as if she could shake the thought away. "That's not what she's doing!"

"*No. No, of course not. She's much too nice a lady to leave you here and forget about you, Lishu.*" Sotei seemed to be trying to walk back her words a little, perhaps out of kindness to Lishu. "*I just wish you could see the view from up here. I wish I could share it with you. If you*

ever change your mind, just come on up. Tell your lady-in-waiting to take half a day off—that should be plenty. They change the guards at…"

Lishu stared at the ground and listened to Sotei describe the timing of the changes of guard. Then Sotei left to clean up her meal, withdrawing the pipe from the ceiling so Kanan wouldn't notice it.

Footsteps came again, and this time it was Kanan, who entered the room saying, "I'm sorry to keep you waiting so long, Lady Lishu." There appeared to be some perspiration on her face, but at some point she'd found time to change clothes, including a new sash.

Kanan set Lishu's breakfast on the table and the consort picked up the bowl, taking a lotus leaf and starting in on the loathed seafood congee. It was stone cold, the gruel like glue in her mouth, thick and sticky and flavorless.

Chapter 15: Scandal (Part Three)

"I don't understand it!"

That was the only appraisal Maomao could offer of the book on which she had spent so much money. She'd read it twice through, thinking maybe she had missed the interesting part the first time. Still flummoxed, she copied the entire thing out. And this was where it had gotten her.

"I just don't understand."

This was something deeper than whether or not she found the book interesting. The problem came down to a matter of emotions. As an experiment, she showed the book to the courtesans at the Verdigris House, and a struggle promptly broke out among the women to read it, all of their eyes glittering. It didn't seem to matter to them that the text was riddled with incorrect characters, or that parts of it had clearly been mistranslated. It seemed to be just that appealing.

A boy and a girl from rival houses meet at a banquet and fall in love at first sight. All well and good, until the boy gets in an argument with someone from the girl's family and kills him. That only makes relations between the two households even worse—but it doesn't stop the young lovers, burning with passion, from getting married.

Notwithstanding the stiffness of the translation, it was the behavior of the main characters that really left Maomao befuddled, both of them driven by the passions of youth. At the end of the story, both protagonists wound up dead because of a bit of miscommunication. They could have avoided the whole problem, Maomao thought, if they had been a little more methodical in keeping in touch with each other and explaining what they were going to do.

When she offered this opinion to the enraptured courtesans, however, it was greeted with some fist shaking and the pronouncement: "That just goes to show how *fiery* and *passionate* their love was!"

Someone else took her by the shoulders and explained, “You see, it’s precisely those hiccups of destiny that make tragedy shine so brightly!”

Maomao did not understand the first damn thing about it.

So this was what Consort Lishu had been copying out? Had she seen anything especially attractive in it?

Maomao had already sent Jinshi word about the book; the text she had with her now was a copy she’d made in the course of a single night. It had no illustrations, but when tied with a simple string, it did bear a certain resemblance to a real book. She’d had Chou-u help her, though, so the paper wasn’t exactly even, and the entire product had—well, let’s call it *character*.

“I told you I would do pictures!” Chou-u had said.

“Maybe next time. Just try to cut the paper straight, will you?”

She’d spent all her time in arguments of that sort. Meanwhile, no matter how long she waited, matters surrounding Consort Lishu didn’t seem to progress. In fact, nothing much seemed to be happening at all.

She did, however, receive word from Lahan. He said he would be “meeting with the west” soon, and asked if she wanted to be a part of it.

“The west” was presumably the golden-haired envoy—the one who had faced them with the audacious choice between material aid and political asylum. Lahan and the envoy had already had one discussion, but he claimed nothing had yet been resolved. Maomao had been there, but with all the talk of politics and business, she hadn’t been able to contribute much besides warming an additional chair.

Hence she declined this new invitation. What if the eccentric strategist heard and tried to poke his head in? Granted, rumor had it he was keeping busy these days making some kind of book about Go. When he needed a breather, he went and made trouble at the medical office instead.

He should do his damn job, Maomao thought. It did occur to her that, at least during peacetime, work might actually go better for the freak’s people if he wasn’t present—but when he was at his office, Maomao knew she was safe, so she wished he would stay there. Besides, she felt bad for the medical staff having to suffer his regular incursions.

“Haven’t had any real work to speak of recently,” Maomao said

with a great big sigh. She sometimes busied herself making stocks of the medicines she needed regularly, but recently there had been a dearth of opportunities to try unusual drugs or make up new concoctions. She frequently had to leave the shop in other hands as she was summoned away to tasks that were frankly outside her job description, and it had left her main vocation growing a bit stagnant. It didn't help that she still had to teach Sazen as she made most of her drugs.

She just wanted to get a taste of some unusual draught once in a while. To mix up some fresh new pharmaceutical and find out what it did. She had been working her way through the medicines she'd purchased in the western capital, but they left her wondering if there wasn't anything more unusual out there, more *interesting*.

On the top of her medicine cabinet were three small pots for plants, one of which had a fingertip-sized green bud sprouting from it. These were where she had planted the cactus seeds. They came from a dry climate, so she didn't water them much. She had the sense that when they got bigger, they might have all kinds of uses—but the thought that it could be years before she had the opportunity to find out what they were was enough to make her feel faint.

Maybe I'll get lucky and find a blowfish liver on the ground or something, she thought idly, gazing at the pots.

The door clattered and she looked up, wondering who it was, to find that the visitor had dropped something at their feet. Something wrapped in cloth—it looked like a branch. Maomao reached out, her eyes glowing. It was a deer's antler! And not just that—it was still soft. An antler that had been in the process of growing, not one that had simply calcified and fallen away when the deer grew a new one. It was nearly one *shaku* long, and she knew exactly what it was.

"A velvet antler!" she exclaimed.

It was the newly grown antler of a deer. That freshness, that was the important thing when you were selling them—they were harvested first thing in spring, and the very tips were a particularly prized and particularly expensive form of the product. Yes, the tip was attached to this one. It was quite long, but judging from the softness and the way it was covered in fuzz, it would still possess plenty of medicinal potency.

The sparkle in Maomao's eyes was accompanied by a thread of

drool dangling from her mouth. Hawkers occasionally tried to sell velvet antler, but it was always powdered, and despite their insistence that they sold "only the finest products," it was obvious that stuff other than the tip had been mixed in. Even so, there was no end of customers who, figuring the stuff still had some medicinal properties, wanted a dose before visiting the courtesans. The medicine was alleged to be very *effective* for male customers.

Just imagine how much medicine she could make with an antler this size!

First I'm going to need some boiling water, to kill any insects and coagulate the blood, she thought, looking lovingly at her prize—when a large hand reached in from the side and wrapped the cloth back around the antler, stealing it away from her.

Hey, hands off! Maomao looked up, her displeasure plain on her face, to discover someone she hadn't seen in a long time. They wore a smile one could have easily taken for that of a gentle celestial nymph, but the scar that ran down their right cheek showed that this was more than just an idealized beauty.

"It's been quite a while, Master Jinshi," she said.

Almost two months had passed since their return from the western capital, during which they hadn't seen each other. They'd exchanged some letters, but always about business matters, and it was always either Basen or some anonymous messenger who brought word from Jinshi to the pleasure district.

She thought he looked a little more angular than before. Maybe he'd lost some weight, what with it being so hot these days. "Are you sleeping properly?" she asked. For all his inordinate beauty, this nobleman was surprisingly given to overworking himself, and frequently appeared to be stumbling around from fatigue.

"*That's* the first thing you say to me? And what are you reaching out for?" Jinshi was looking at Maomao's hand and sounding rather exasperated. Her fingers refused to let go of the velvet antler; she had a firm grip on the package and was trying to pull it toward her.

"I thought perhaps it might be for me, sir."

"I daresay that's why I brought it."

"Then if you would give it to me. Please."

"Somehow I'm not sure I want to anymore..."

A death sentence! Maomao grabbed the cloth with both hands and pulled. Jinshi held the antler above his head mockingly;

Maomao bounced up and down swiping at it, but he was a good *shaku* taller than her and she was never going to reach it.

Son of a—!

In spite of her imprecatory internal monologue, she was actually somewhat reassured, for this was the same kind of reward Jinshi had always offered her.

Suddenly, however, she felt herself tilting in mid-jump. For a second, she was treated to a view of the ceiling, until Jinshi's face appeared above her. His gentle smile of a moment before was gone; instead, a hard light in his eyes pierced Maomao like a blade. He had swept her feet out from under her as she jumped for the antler, and caught her with his free hand.

"Master Jinshi. The antler, please." Somehow, it was the only thing that would come out of her mouth. One might even say that if she'd said anything else, she wouldn't be Maomao.

"Listen to what I have to say, and then I'll think about it."

"Please change 'I'll think about it' to 'I'll give it to you.'"

Just "thinking about it" was too ambiguous a commitment when it came to a social superior, and that concerned her. She didn't want an offer he might renege on at any moment; she wanted an assurance.

"Fine... I'll give it to you, but listen to what I have to say."

"If *all* I have to do is listen, then okay."

He narrowed his eyes at her, but didn't protest, which she (somewhat unilaterally) took as agreement.

"While we're at it, might I ask you to let me go?" she said.

"I refuse."

No dice there. So she was going to end up hearing him out on an incline, with her back leaned against his knee. She considered trying to look for help, but the door and windows were shut. Even if they'd been open, the other residents of the Verdigris House would probably have just looked on grinning, so maybe it wouldn't have mattered.

Maybe Chou-u will walk in on us, Maomao thought hopefully, but her wonderful, lovable little brat was out today, learning to sketch with his teacher. Ukyou or Sazen, whoever was free, would have taken him there and would pick him up again. The fact that the madam allowed this seemed proof positive that she believed there would be a way to put Chou-u's pictures to good use in the future.

Jinshi continued to look at Maomao with an expression like a

wild beast who might bite at any moment, but at least he got right to the point. “Are you ready to take me up on…what I proposed?”

To be fair, he had never actually *proposed* anything. But even Maomao wasn’t dense enough to miss what he was referring to. The night of the banquet in the western capital, Jinshi had told Maomao the true reason he’d brought her along. Well, all right, he hadn’t actually *told* her in so many words—but she felt it was correct to understand that he sought to marry her.

Life wasn’t like those stories—in real life, you didn’t have to be madly in love with someone to marry them. Powerful people often got married as a play in their power games; and even commoners might wed in order to support themselves, like a farmer who simply needed more hands to help in the fields. If both parties stood to gain something from the union, or at least if one partner was to the other’s liking, then they didn’t necessarily both have to have feelings for each other. So long as the proposed match wasn’t completely distasteful, it might be best simply to accept.

He’s got strange tastes, though…

Surely Jinshi could have had his pick of beautiful, noble women. Who would choose a weed like wood sorrel when he was surrounded by peonies and roses? There must have been someone better suited to him than Maomao.

Like Consort Lishu! Sure, she was currently under arrest on suspicions of infidelity, but as long as Jinshi knew she was innocent, then where was the problem? People would say whatever nasty things they wanted, but Jinshi surely wasn’t the kind to believe them.

Yet here he was, urging his suit on her again, the next act of their little drama. She desperately hoped he wouldn’t strangle her again. This time, he might finish the job.

“Do you hate me so much?” he asked, his face now less like a wild dog and more like a puppy. Love, hate—some people wanted the world to be so black and white. Why wouldn’t he give her the choice of a gray area?

“I suppose I don’t hate you as such,” she said. She might even think of him favorably. Certainly, she regarded this noble more positively than she had back when they’d first met.

Jinshi pursed his lips, not very pleased with this evasive answer. Maybe he was hoping she would come right out and say she loved him, but quite frankly, Maomao wasn’t at a point where

she could bring those words to her lips. The best she could manage was that she wasn't without a certain affection for him.

Instead she said, "The caterpillar fungus made me very happy."

"Is that all you're going to say?"

"Also, the ox bezoars were most helpful."

"And what else?"

"And I want that velvet antler."

She reached out for the package, which Jinshi had put behind his back, but he planted a palm on her belly to keep her from sitting up, and she couldn't reach it. She kicked her legs from sheer frustration, and this time he grabbed her ankle. She was just trying to decide what he might be planning when he brushed the tip of his pinky finger along the back of her foot.

"Hrk?!" Maomao choked, squirming. The many experiments she'd conducted throughout her life had made her far less sensitive to pain, and the instruction of her various older sisters had numbed her to matters sexual as well, but even Maomao had her weak points. The back of her foot, and her back as well, were hopelessly vulnerable to a gentle brush of the fingers.

"M-Master Jinshi... That's...not...fair!"

"Fair? I don't know what you mean," he said, and *sliiide* went his fingers again. How did he know to do that? When had her secret gotten out? Why did Jinshi know Maomao's weak point?

"Let me go. Y-You're dirty."

"You're the only one here who seems worried about it."

She hated the way he pretended indifference. Seriously, how did he know? Only a few people were privy to Maomao's vulnerability. The madam, Pairin, and...

Then she thought of the always-in-control lady-in-waiting in her first flush of old age, and her eyes went wide. Suiren had punished her once by tickling her with a feather duster—but she had just been joking around and had stopped right away; Maomao didn't think she had given away what a vulnerable spot that was.

To think, Suiren had figured it out from that brief encounter—she was truly terrifying.

The tickling had moved down her foot now; she gritted her teeth and twisted, pressing her lips together and trying not to make so much as a sound. She wasn't quite successful.

The long fingers worked their way to the arch of her foot, inducing a thrash from her, whereupon they went to her other heel.

The tickling kept moving before she could become accustomed to it in any one place, landing on her toes, the top of her foot, her ankle, and even her calf.

Jinshi looked down at her with a smile, totally in control of things. He seemed to be savoring the sight of Maomao flopping like a fish despite her best efforts to control herself. Teasingly, he brushed the top of her foot, which was by now arched like a bow.

She'd never imagined he might get even for last time quite like this. Finally, unable to hold it in any longer, laughter burst out of her. The book on the desk, the one Maomao had been copying, tumbled to the floor. At last thinking, perhaps, that he had gone too far, Jinshi let her go.

Maomao got her breathing under control, straightened her robe, and wiped the tears that had welled up in her eyes. At that, Jinshi swallowed audibly; he looked conflicted and wouldn't meet her eyes. His gaze landed instead on the book, which he picked up.

"Have you ever read that, Master Jinshi?"

"I have."

"What did you think of it?"

There was a wry smile on Jinshi's face—he seemed to feel about the same way Maomao did about the book. He understood exactly what it would mean for someone of noble birth to let their actions be dictated by their own romantic impulses. If he didn't, he couldn't have worked in the rear palace all those years.

"I think there must have been some other way."

"Talk like that could see you scorned by all the world's women."

"Not including yourself, I suppose."

Impatient youth gave rise to burning passion, and love that ended in grief was counted beautiful because it was so tragic. The text stated that the young woman at the center of the story was thirteen years old, but given that this was a translation from the west, that would probably make her fourteen or fifteen by the count used in Li, where a person became a year older at the start of each year. That was still young, though—young enough that she might still be ruled by her passions, making it impossible to dismiss the story out of hand.

Maomao would never have done such a thing—by that age, she had already been thoroughly indoctrinated into the thinking of the pleasure district. And Jinshi would have been established in the

rear palace by then. They had spent that most impressionable age in environments that were, in their own way, very similar.

"I wonder if I might have been capable of such things had I grown up somewhere else," Jinshi said, and Maomao could tell that he was speaking from the heart. She couldn't deny that it might be true. But it was, ultimately, just a possibility. Hypothetical.

Instead of answering, she murmured, "I don't want to be an enemy." Jinshi gave her a sidelong look as if to ask whose enemy she meant. "To Empress Gyokuyou," she said.

Would Jinshi understand what she was saying? If not, that was fine, Maomao thought. There were things even he didn't know.

"You—"

He seemed about to ask her something else when a horse whinnied outside. There was a sound of rushing footsteps, and then someone shouted, "Master Jinka!" It was a name he had used before when visiting the pleasure district, and often assumed.

Jinshi frowned, wondering what it was this time, and opened the door. A man stood there, out of breath—one of the servants who often accompanied Jinshi and Basen. "Pardon me, sir!" he said, kneeling once and then taking a step closer. He glanced around. It seemed he didn't want Maomao to hear what he had to say. "It's about the matter of the white flower."

"Then she's more than welcome to hear about it," Jinshi said.

Maomao looked quizzical at the code word, but the servant promptly dispelled her confusion. "Consort Lishu has escaped her room in the tower and is on the highest floor," he said, his face a mask of horror.

○●○

Let's take a quick trip back in time.

The sweet-bitter scent wafted through the room. Lishu sat in the corner, leaning against her chest, wrapped in her blanket.

"Has it smelled a little funny around here recently?" Kanan asked, but Lishu shook her head. The pipe wasn't protruding from the ceiling; Sotei, with whom Lishu had been speaking until moments before, had withdrawn when she heard Kanan's footsteps. Kanan had taken a look at the decaying ceiling and said she would call someone to repair it, but Lishu had urged her not to. She didn't

want some stranger coming into the room, and anyway, the whole place was falling apart; fixing that one bit of the ceiling wouldn't change anything. Thankfully, Kanan relented.

"Lady Lishu, your meal is ready." Lishu could hear the clatter of the tray being set down. But she knew it was just cold congee and soup on the table. Sometimes the portion of the side dish was stingy too. At first, she even looked forward to this poor fare, but these days she just didn't care anymore. She would force herself to eat half of it, because Kanan was watching, but even that was a struggle. Maybe it was because she spent all day, every day, cooped up in this room, with even less to do than she'd had in the rear palace.

"Don't huddle in a corner. Come out where there's light," Kanan said. There was no light here. There was a window in the other room that looked out onto the hallway, which was arguably a tiny bit better than the room Lishu was in right now, but that was all. She could go out in the hallway and walk from one staircase to the other, but that didn't amount to much.

Lishu stood unsteadily. The fatigue was awful. She heaved herself into her chair and dipped her spoon into the viscous, gluey congee. It was just plain today, with a vanishingly faint sprinkle of salt. She thought a bit of black vinegar might help, but there wasn't any.

"I'm so sorry, milady. I must have forgotten it," Kanan said with a deep bow. Her apology seemed heartfelt, but Lishu couldn't help noticing that she was wearing a different robe from when she'd left. How long had it taken Lishu since she got here to notice that Kanan changed clothes each time she went to get Lishu's food? The new robe had a similar look and pattern to the old one, as if Kanan hoped Lishu wouldn't notice the difference.

More and more, though, Lishu mistrusted her. Lishu was in this situation because of a book a maid had given to her to copy. She strongly suspected it was her former chief lady-in-waiting who had put the woman up to it. Both people she had once believed were serving her faithfully.

Kanan herself had once been among the ladies making fun of Lishu, but she had had a change of heart after someone had attempted to poison Lishu at a garden party. And it was true that she'd been far kinder to her mistress since then—so much so that Lishu had insisted Kanan become her chief lady-in-waiting, not a

mere food taster.

But had Kanan really done all this for Lishu's benefit? When she had first assumed the position of chief lady, Kanan had had minimal authority; the other ladies-in-waiting often simply ignored her. She had soldiered on and done her best, though, or so Lishu had believed. But was that true? Might she not still be laughing at Lishu with the other ladies behind her back? Might she not be pretending to be sympathetic, only to go back and report what she heard in confidence for the entertainment of the others?

It couldn't be true, could it? If it were, she would never have followed Lishu all the way to this tower.

She tried desperately to push such thoughts away, but they wouldn't leave her alone. Instead of shaking her head, she brought the spoon to her mouth—and bit down on something hard.

She spat into her handkerchief, coming up with rice, traces of blood—and a fingertip-sized pebble.

"Lady Lishu!" Kanan said, looking at her with concern. Maybe some sand had gotten into the food by accident—but this was much too large to be a grain of sand.

Unable to focus her eyes, Lishu stirred her spoon through the congee. Two, three, four—there were too many stones at the bottom of the bowl to dismiss as an accident.

"I'll go get a new bowl right away!" Kanan said and reached for the congee, but Lishu stopped her.

"I don't want it."

She didn't even have an appetite. She didn't want to choke down more cold, disgusting congee.

"Lady Lishu..."

"I don't want it! I don't want it! I don't want it!" Lishu shook her head furiously and swept the food off the table. The bowl and tray hit the floor with a crash, soup and side dish flying everywhere. Lishu tore at her hair and her nose started to run. She began to weep piteously. "Why?! Why is it always me?!"

Despised by her father, tormented by her half-sister, *twice* sent to the rear palace as a political tool. All of that had been awful, but she had borne it. She'd thought that maybe if she kept quiet and did as she was told, her father might be nice to her. That hope had been dashed by the rumors that she was an illegitimate child. It had turned out she was her father's blood, but his attitude hadn't changed at all. That's right—it ate at him. He couldn't stand the fact

that he was from a branch house, while Lishu's mother had been from the main family. That was why he sent her only the cruelest ladies-in-waiting. Maybe he had been behind all of the trouble she'd endured to this point.

Lishu wasn't cut out to be a high consort, but there she was, and she had to either stand up and let herself be compared with the other consorts, or try to shrink down so small as to be invisible. Those were her only options. At the garden party, her father hadn't even tried to talk to her.

If he hadn't wanted her, why had he had her? Did he enjoy watching Lishu suffer in her limbo? Maybe all of them did. Her father, her half-sister, her ladies-in-waiting, the maid, Kanan, everyone... All of them...

With a start, Lishu realized everything around her was a mess. The congee bowl was broken, the table was overturned, and her chair had hit the floor. Everything that wasn't nailed down was on the ground, and Kanan was in a corner, hiding her face with hands covered in grains of rice. A dish lay shattered at her feet. Had Lishu thrown it at her? There was a thin red line on Kanan's cheek and her expression as she tried to gauge Lishu was one of terror.

Lishu felt her blood run cold. She'd never meant to do this. Yet she was the only one who could have turned the room upside down this way. Her mind went blank, and she started to perspire heavily.

"Go..."

"Lady Lishu..."

"Get out of here, please. And don't come back!" She hit the wall, hard, and stamped her feet and shouted. She didn't want to do this. But it was the only thing that would come out of her mouth.

"I'm so sorry," Kanan said. "I'll go change..." She looked sadly around the upturned room, and then she left.

When Kanan's footsteps had vanished, Lishu sank down onto the floor. Her eyes as she looked up at the ceiling were clouded with tears. She didn't want to do this, so why had she? She'd felt like she needed to attack someone, lest she be attacked again, and in her anxiety she had lashed out at Kanan.

Lishu's face must have been a mess. She wanted to cry great gasping sobs, but if she started weeping, someone might come. She hugged her knees tight instead.

"*Lishu? Lishu!*" came the voice from the next room. The pipe was poking through the ceiling, and Sotei was talking to her. With

her ears, she must have heard the entire humiliating exchange. "*What's going on? It sounds like your lady-in-waiting left.*"

"It's nothing," Lishu said, moving to sit once more by the chest of drawers. The sweet-bitter smell calmed her down, and Sotei's muffled voice soothed her anxiety.

She wondered who Sotei was.

"*I've got an idea, Lishu.*"

"What's that, Sotei?"

"*They'll change the guard soon. Won't you come upstairs?*"

Her voice was sweet, pleasant. Any other time, Lishu might have dithered about the decision and then turned her down. But now, now she didn't have it in her.

She had no reason not to accept Sotei's suggestion.

Lishu pressed her ear to the door and listened for the footsteps. She listened as they came down from above, went by, and continued downward. She heard the pounding of her own heart, so loud she was afraid the passing guard might notice it. She tried not to breathe. It wasn't as if the guard would think anything was unusual should he hear a sound at that moment, but what Lishu was about to attempt had her in a state of absolute anxiety.

She heard the footsteps reach the bottom of the stairs; heard a door open and shut. Trying to slow her racing heart, Lishu stepped out the door.

She took a slow step into the hallway. She was holding her shoes in her hand so they wouldn't give her away. She worked her way up the stairs, step by step, and opened the door—ever so slowly, so that it wouldn't make a sound.

The next floor up was in even worse repair than the one Lishu lived on. At least her chambers had been swept, but this level seemed rife with dust. She put on her shoes and looked around. There were several rooms on this floor, but only one of them had the door cracked open. Still fighting her pounding pulse, Lishu knocked on it. "Sotei?"

There seemed to be no answer. Lishu had just turned around, thinking she must have the wrong room, when something wrapped around her from behind.

"Ha ha! Welcome to my humble abode." A young woman's voice, no longer muffled, sounded in Lishu's ear. The hand that had grabbed her was delicate and pale, laced with blue veins. "I can't

tell you how long I've been waiting." She had that same unique smell, sweet and bitter at the same time. The same one that had been wafting down to Lishu through the ceiling.

"Sotei?" Lishu asked again, feeling goosebumps on her neck. Sotei seemed to be resting her chin on Lishu's head, and something was tickling her nape. It was a white bundle—the best silken threads. A tassel to something, maybe.

"You have such nice skin, Lishu. A good, healthy color, but not tanned by the sun." The tip of Sotei's finger slid along Lishu's cheek. "And this lovely black hair. You have someone who cares enough to comb it for you even in a place like this. I'm jealous! Ooh, but a messy eater, are we? You've got a grain of rice here."

Her delicate fingers plucked away the grain of rice that was stuck to Lishu's hair, slowly, almost as if she were scraping it away, and then she dropped it on the floor. Her fingers were red in places—they looked like burns that were just now healing.

"I feel so sorry for you," Sotei said. "Mommy dead when you were still a baby, used as a political tool practically since you could walk. Rejected by your family, mocked by your own ladies-in-waiting..."

Yes! Yes, that was Lishu's story.

"Truly, it's a shame. No one understands you. Why do you suppose you're always the victim?"

The gentle voice and the aroma enveloped Lishu. She could feel the body heat from the pale skin. It had been so long since she'd last felt another person so close to her. She felt like she might simply melt away.

"They're all terrible to you. You're nothing but sweet and kind, and all they do is bully you and make your life a living nightmare."

Lishu, nearly melting into the sweet odor, nodded at Sotei's words. Yes, that's right. They were always bullying her. Ignoring her. Using her.

What had Lishu ever done wrong?

For the longest time now...

For the longest time...

A half-formed question drifted through Lishu's hazy mind. When, she wondered, had she told Sotei about her father?

"They all leave you alone to eat cold food by yourself in a gloomy room. Unbelievable."

When had she mentioned the food being cold? The question

occurred to her, but she couldn't seem to make her brain work. She felt Sotei's embrace slacken, though, and she managed to turn around, to finally face someone whom she had only known as a voice until this moment.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that? Is there something on my face?"

The smiling girl before Lishu was a color she'd never seen before. She was beautiful, in her way. Her figure was peach-like, her lips full and red like cherries. But her skin seemed...colorless. People from the west had pale skin, but this was far, far paler than that. Lishu could never have made her skin this white, no matter how copiously she applied white makeup powder. Sotei's hair, too, was like an old woman's. It was her hair that Lishu had taken for a tassel, hair that ran straight and true down her back.

"Do I look strange to you?" Sotei asked. Her eyebrows, slowly furrowing, were white too. And her eyes, they were as red as rubies.

On the way to the western capital, Lishu had heard the rumors —that there was a woman like one of the mythical immortals stirring up trouble in every region and making the powerful people of the capital dance in the palm of her hand.

"It's you. The White Lady..."

"So you know about me. That makes us two of a kind, then." Sotei twirled Lishu's hair around the end of her finger. "Because I know about you too. I just never thought we would find ourselves in the same place together." She smiled—then tugged on Lishu's hair. "This black hair—I'm jealous of it!"

Lishu couldn't speak.

"And your healthy skin! You can go out in the sun and it doesn't get inflamed and burn."

Still Lishu was silent.

"I can't even stand the light from a window. You complained about the gloom, Lishu? The darkness? Those gloomy corners are the only ones where I can survive!"

Sotei's eyes were narrow and she was staring fixedly at Lishu.

"I have something to tell you. All the torment that's been inflicted upon you? You can't blame anyone for it. It's your own fault!" Slim fingers danced across Lishu's cheek, rough fingertips scratching her skin. "You never had to starve growing up, and you put on all their pretty clothes without question. But you just sit around doing nothing, don't you, Lishu? You ought to know that if

you can't protect yourself, you're going to be a target."

Now the fingers pinched at her cheek, digging into her skin, until the nails left scratches behind.

"It sickens me to look at you." A tremendous frown came over Sotei's face, a look of contempt every bit as brutal as her words. Lishu shrank into herself. "It's disgusting just seeing you there."

Sotei's chilly stare made Lishu's heart skip a beat. It reminded her of so many stares she'd seen before. Her father's, her half-sister's, her ladies'...

Lishu's teeth started to chatter. She felt like she might be sucked into those red eyes. Overhead, she heard scurrying, like bugs. It sounded to her like the voices of the maids and servants, spreading their tales about her and condemning her behind her back.

"No... Stop..." Lishu shook her head; she pressed a hand to her cheek, which must have had red scratch marks on it, and looked at Sotei with fear in her eyes.

Sotei's lips twisted. "Sickening... It's like looking at my old self."

Lishu had no hope anymore of understanding what Sotei was talking about. She began to run, just desperate to get out of there. She dashed through the decaying hallway, ran up the stairs. As Sotei had told her, the door to the next floor wasn't locked. Lishu kept running, higher and higher. She lost count of how many floors she had gone up. The hem of her robe was filthy, and the creaking of the floorboards had become deafening.

She saw a door that wasn't like the others. For one thing, it had a lock, but the lock was rotting away. Lishu grabbed the handle. The door was somewhat heavy, but she opened it, to find herself confronted with a leaden sky. No doubt the rulers of the past, looking out over the entire capital from this vantage point with a cup of wine in hand, had believed their glory would last forever.

It was a balcony, albeit one ravaged by exposure to the elements. Lishu took an experimental step and found the wood groaned weakly underfoot.

Normally she would have been frozen by fear, but now she walked forward, one unsteady step at a time. The railing was equally dilapidated; all the paint had flaked off. The wind was blowing, whipping over her cheeks and sending her hair everywhere.

Lishu could see birds flying. They looked so free. She reached

out toward them, but of course, she couldn't reach them.

She looked at her hand, which grasped uselessly at the sky.

Chapter 16: Basen and Lishu

When Maomao and Jinshi got word, they rushed to the tower by horse. There was no time to arrange a carriage; instead, they commandeered the mount the messenger had come on, with Jinshi at the reins. Maomao didn't bother to ask for his permission as she jumped up behind him. He only said, "We'll be going fast. Don't fall off." She took that as an okay. She pressed her face into his back, which smelled of perfume, and braced herself, trying to remain upright.

When they arrived at the palace, Jinshi removed his mask, begrudging even the time to show his insignia of office. The horse didn't even slow down as they made for the tower where Consort Lishu was confined.

A crowd had already gathered in front of the pagoda. In addition to the guards, there were gawking bureaucrats and court ladies, faced by soldiers insisting they stay back. No sooner had the court ladies noticed Jinshi than they blushed furiously—until they spotted Maomao and looked incensed instead. But Maomao and Jinshi both ignored them; there was no time to pander to the likes of them.

They could see a woman on the uppermost story of the pagoda, a young woman gazing into the distance, her hair disheveled—it was Consort Lishu. Maomao couldn't tell what she was doing; she seemed to be trying to grab hold of something, reaching out with one hand toward the sky.

What's she doing up there? Maomao thought. The building was so old, it creaked under your feet; Maomao couldn't believe the timid consort had gone all the way to the top floor of her own volition. She was too far away to make out her expression, though, or guess what exactly she was trying to do.

"Let me through! Let me through!" cried a familiar voice. Maomao realized that the woman being restrained by the guards was Lishu's chief lady-in-waiting. She was stretching out her arms as far as she could, as if she might be able to reach the door of the

tower, but the guards wouldn't let her. "Lady Lishu—!"

The woman's clothes were covered in mud. It was strange; it didn't look like it had gotten there when the guards had stopped her. It almost looked like someone had thrown a mud pie at her.

But the chief lady-in-waiting wasn't the only familiar face.

"What's going on?! What is Consort Lishu doing all the way up there?!" Basen rushed up, out of breath. He must have heard the news too. Maybe he'd been exercising when it reached him, because he was dressed in what seemed to be a martial arts training uniform rather than his usual official attire.

The addition of a shouting young man to the panicked lady-in-waiting only increased the general confusion. Now the guards had to deal with Basen, who was bent on getting into the pagoda. They tried to push him back, but only found themselves dragged along instead.

Ah, the infamous strength. Maomao had learned about it firsthand in the western capital—but she sensed there was something more than simple physical power at work here. She couldn't think about it now, though; they needed to figure out what to do about Consort Lishu.

"Calm down!" A clear, beautiful voice rang out. Basen and the chief lady-in-waiting both stopped and looked at its owner—Jinshi. He passed his horse's reins to one of the soldiers, then strode over to the two of them. "I will go."

"B-But..." the lady-in-waiting stuttered.

"I said, I'll do it." Jinshi's expression brooked no argument. The lady-in-waiting sank to the ground. There was a red line on her face and grains of rice in her hair.

Was somebody harassing her? Maomao wondered. It wasn't impossible. You didn't have to be in the rear palace to find plenty of unpleasant people. With word going around that her lady was under arrest on suspicions of infidelity, it would hardly be surprising if the chief lady-in-waiting suffered some reprisals as well.

As far as Maomao could tell, this woman was the only lady to accompany Lishu, so she must have been tending to the consort all this time, all by herself, with no one to help her. At first, Maomao had taken her for nothing more than a particularly nasty food taster—she was struck by how much people could change.

"Why did you leave the consort alone? Were you going to get

her meal?" Jinshi asked. There was no kindness in his voice, but neither was his tone cold.

His even demeanor seemed to help the lady-in-waiting get herself under control as well. She said, "My lady has been most depressed recently. She's seemed weak, maybe because she can't leave her chambers and has no way of getting fresh air. I think today she reached her limit. She expelled me from her room—she doesn't appear to trust anyone."

"So you left until she got a hold of herself?"

"Yes, sir. I needed to change, anyway... Although now it seems I'll need to do it again." She looked at her filthy skirt.

Jinshi nodded and headed toward the door.

"I'm coming with you," Basen said, and started to go after him, but the other man only looked at him.

"There's no need for you to come. It's not your job."

Basen scowled, clenching his fists.

He's not wrong, Maomao thought. Unlike Jinshi, who was personally acquainted with Consort Lishu from working in the rear palace, Basen had merely accompanied her on their trip west. Whatever feelings he might have for her, dealing with her was not his business.

"But—" he started, a pained look on his face.

"You are my adjutant. You understand what that means, yes?"

Basen didn't say anything.

"Consider the worst-case scenario and prepare for it. You're the only one who can." With that, Jinshi disappeared into the tower.

He really trusts this guy. She didn't know whether Jinshi was making the best choice or not, but she knew it was a difficult decision—and she also saw that she needed to do what she could to help.

Basen looked deeply pensive for a moment, then called one of the officials over and began giving instructions. She thought he said something about getting together every blanket and mattress they could find, but Lishu was too high up for that to help.

Meanwhile, Maomao did what only Maomao could. "Did Consort Lishu display any other unusual behavior?" she asked, rubbing the lady-in-waiting's back. Maomao had observed the scratch on the woman's cheek and wondered if Lishu had had some kind of fit. She was usually so docile, but if she was feeling that paranoid, it wouldn't have been surprising.

“I don’t know if I would say unusual, but she’s seemed especially interested in the ceiling lately. I think she was bothered by some hole in the woodwork.”

Was something on the floor above on her mind? Would that explain why she had gone up to the top story?

“I think there was someone on the level above us. There was a strange smell in our room sometimes, and I think it came from up there.”

“A strange smell?”

“Yes... It was like perfume, but it was nothing I’d ever smelled before. I didn’t like it very much, but it seemed to please the consort. She spent a lot of time sitting where it was most noticeable.”

Maomao cocked her head, and this time turned to one of the guards. “Was there anyone else in that tower?” she asked.

The guards glanced at each other, looking stricken. Their faces communicated that they knew something, but couldn’t say what.

“*Was there anyone else?!*” Maomao demanded—but the answer came from an unexpected source.

“Not was. Is.” A man with spectacles, an abacus, and tousled hair came trotting up to the conversation. “Although I requested that if anyone else were put in that tower, they be kept as far away from them as possible.” It was Lahan, with an implicit rebuke for the guards.

“Apologies, sir. The tower is old... The upper floors didn’t seem to be in a usable state.”

“Well, I didn’t think anyone else would end up in there, anyway. Certainly not a consort.”

“What are you talking about?” Maomao said.

“Only what I asked to be done. Lest it become a diplomatic incident, you see.”

“Diplomatic incident?” Maomao didn’t *see* at all. What did that have to do with anything?

“I told you you should have come to my meeting with that western beauty. She asked me for this.”

“This western beauty of yours—you mean the special envoy?!”

“Keep your voice down,” Lahan said, slapping a hand over Maomao’s mouth.

The guards didn’t appear to have heard, but Lishu’s chief lady-in-waiting reacted. “The special envoy... Yes, that reminds me!”

“What is it?” Maomao asked.

“You asked me if anything unusual had happened with Lady Lishu. And I just remembered...”

“Yes?! What?!” Maomao grabbed the woman by the shoulders, all but shaking her.

“One of the ladies-in-waiting released a bird. A white bird we got from the envoy.”

“A bird? What happened to the mirror?” Maomao had been under the impression that the envoys had gifted large mirrors to each of the high consorts—had Lishu not gotten one?

“We did receive a mirror, but Consort Lishu was given a pair of mating birds as well, on the grounds that she was the youngest. The envoys thought perhaps she might be lonely, so far from her parents.”

“And they thought birds would help?”

“I suppose so. But Lady Lishu starts sneezing anytime she touches an animal’s fur or feathers, so she didn’t see much of them. She felt bad not being able to care properly for them, and gave them to one of the maids. A bit back, while Lady Lishu was away, the woman let the bird go. In fact...she seemed to have let them both go, I’m afraid.”

The birds... She let them go? Maomao felt like the pieces were just about to fall into place. She searched her memory desperately, trying to figure out why this seemed so important. *Could it be...*

“These birds didn’t happen to be pigeons, did they?”

“They might have been. I never actually saw them, so I’m not sure, but I did hear them cooing, I think.”

Pigeons knew how to get back to their homes. The page Lishu had copied from the novel had been rolled up like a string. What if it had been tied to a pigeon’s leg?

There was something else too. “At the banquet for the envoys last summer, wasn’t there somebody talking to you? Not one of the envoys themselves, but one of their servants.”

“Now that you mention it...”

Among the ladies-in-waiting, there had been someone saying something to the effect of: *“The gentlemen of the west are generous and so very handsome!”*

I can’t believe I missed it, Maomao thought. She’d been so sure that the book must have been sold by the visiting caravan. It made sense—someone from the west would have been able to get a hold

of the translation sooner than those in the capital.

But the envoys had come to the banquet specifically to market themselves to the Emperor and his younger brother. Of course they would sound out the palace women first, trying to get whatever information they could. And they would naturally go after the person who looked most vulnerable. If they had decided, during their reconnaissance, that Lishu would be the easiest consort to manipulate, it would certainly explain why they had targeted her after that.

They played us! She should have realized, especially after one of the envoys had turned out to be involved with the Shi clan—and had managed to look perfectly innocent about it.

Now wasn't the time for regret, though. "All right, Lahan. Who is it in that tower?"

In response, Lahan leaned toward Maomao and whispered a name. When she heard it, she immediately broke out in a clammy sweat.

The White Immortal.

Of all the people it could have been... That made Maomao all the more curious about the strange smell that had been drifting into the consort's chambers. With as much as the White Lady knew about drugs, it was entirely possible she'd mixed something into some incense that would dull Lishu's judgment.

Maomao shoved past Lahan and made for the tower. She saw no sign of Basen. He must have taken to heart Jinshi's admonition to prepare for the worst. Anyway, she didn't have time to worry about him now. She needed to go see exactly what was happening with Consort Lishu.

She slipped past the startled guards and into the tower. Hallway, stairs, hallway, stairs. It was enough to make her head spin. She only knew she'd arrived at the top floor because she found several men there.

Jinshi was standing in front of an open door, beyond which was a balcony where Lishu stood, her eyes unfocused. Jinshi was speaking to her calmly. The balcony was falling apart; Lishu was light enough that it could support her, but if Jinshi tried to go out there, his foot might go clean through the floor. He obviously hoped he could talk her back into the building, but it didn't look like it was going very well.

"Don't move... Stay away..." Lishu was saying. What was she

looking at? She was giving little shakes of her head, her face contorted with fear. A beautiful, much-beloved gentleman was standing before her, yet she looked as agonized as if she beheld a monster. Her eyes were utterly blind to his beauty. She was seeing something else, something fantastic.

"Consort..." Jinshi said gently, still trying not to upset her further. He had the right idea—if he could just keep talking to her until she came back to her senses, he might yet succeed.

Maomao stood quietly behind Jinshi. It would be risky for the young man to go out on the balcony; if they wanted to get any closer to Lishu, Maomao would be the better choice.

"I'll go," she said.

"Hey, wait!" Jinshi said, but she brushed his hand away. Quite frankly, she didn't *want* to do this. What if her foot punched a hole through the floor? What was the consort even doing way the hell up here?

That was only one of many bitter questions that occurred to Maomao, but like an idiot, she pressed ahead, consequences be damned. She had boarded this boat, and she was going to ride it until the end. She found one thought growing irresistibly in her mind: now that she'd come this far, she was going to help Consort Lishu.

"Consort," she said. "Lady Ah-Duo is waiting for you."

It was a judicious choice: mentioning her family here and now would almost certainly have had the opposite of the desired effect, and even Jinshi's presence hadn't brought Lishu back to them. Instead, Maomao invoked the name of the person the consort trusted most at this moment.

Her choice earned a twitch from the consort. "Lady...Ah-Duo...?" She seemed to show no fear of that name.

"Yes. She'll be here soon. You need to change before she arrives."

Maomao was careful not to specifically tell Lishu to come back to them. She just needed the consort to move toward her on the balcony. Just stay calm and move...

But it's never that simple.

A sweet-bitter aroma wafted to Maomao's nose. Something went by her without so much as a sound of footsteps, seeming so much a part of the natural world that no one reacted at first. The White Lady passed them by as unnoticed as a breeze.

Jinshi was the first to register her presence; he moved to intercept her, but—

"Gah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!"

There was a shrill, piercing laugh. That was all she did—she laughed. Her red eyes almost closed, her voice was like a wild animal's. It raised goosebumps on Maomao's skin. She reached out reflexively toward Consort Lishu—but she was too late.

In her current state, the laughter was enough to agitate Lishu. Her face twisted, and she fell back against the railing. The woman's cackling must have terrified her.

The rotten railing wasn't even able to support Lishu's modest weight, and she pitched backward into the empty air.

Maomao rushed across the balcony, but the floorboards gave way and she too began to fall. Just when she was expecting to feel a rush of wind against her body, she felt a pressure against her belly instead.

"Noooo!" Jinshi caught her at the last second.

He caught her, but she was unable to catch Lishu. Maomao's hand was empty, and Lishu was gone.

○●○

So this was how it all ended.

Lishu smiled. Her body was dropping through space. Soon she would strike the ground and enter into a sleep from which she would never awaken.

Her surroundings, which had seemed so hazy, were suddenly sharp and clear. She could see the collapsing balcony, and the apothecary, the one who usually acted so indifferent. Ah... She'd thought it felt like someone had been talking to her. It must have been the apothecary.

Lishu fell, unloved by anybody, unneeded. She was only ever in the way, so maybe it would be better if she wasn't there at all. She wouldn't be ridiculed anymore, or laughed at, or ignored. No one would leer at her with cruelty in their smile. But the journey to the ground did seem to be taking such a long time, so long that she wondered if maybe she really had grown wings and flown away like a bird. No, better to dispense with such fantasies. They only made it harder to bear when you came back to reality.

She closed her eyes, preparing to welcome the end, when she

heard a voice.

"Consort!"

It sounded familiar. Whose was it? Without really meaning to, she looked toward the voice.

She saw a man standing on the multitiered roofs. He was grown, but not old enough yet to have acquired a beard or mustache. The sensitive lines of his face stirred something in her memory.

It was the young man who had saved her from the lion at the banquet in the western capital. She'd never had a chance to thank him. She'd thought about it several times, but had never quite managed, so she had meant to send him a letter eventually. Now that she thought about it, she was glad she hadn't. She would have felt bad if the ugly suspicions surrounding her had engulfed him as well.

She wished, though—now, now it was too late—she wished she could have at least told him how grateful she was. She opened her mouth. He would never be able to hear her, but she thought she could at least communicate those two simple words: "Thank you."

Before she could so much as move her lips, though, the young man did something unbelievable. He began running along the roof, old tiles breaking under his feet, chunks of them flying loose. Despite the footing, or lack thereof, the young man jumped. He flew through the air and grabbed Lishu.

What was he doing?

Maybe he was just a little touched in the head. After all, no one could survive a fall from this height. Not even a trained soldier—certainly not one holding an additional person's worth of weight. Yet he held Lishu tightly in his arms.

Why would he embrace her, hold fast to a worthless young woman? It was pointless; it would only lead to both their deaths. She wished he wouldn't do this. Why was he doing this?

Tears poured from her eyes. But the young man, seemingly oblivious to how Lishu felt, smiled awkwardly.

And then there was a tremendous *thump*. The young man's left leg caught the roof below them, but only for a second, and then they were falling again, his leg twisted at a bizarre angle.

"St—" Lishu said, but before she could get the word *Stop* out of her mouth, the young man had kicked off the next roof with his still-functioning right leg. The force of the kick must have been

immense, for Lishu saw some roof tiles come loose.

Leaves rustled as they plummeted into the branches. Lishu caught the smell of fresh foliage. They had dropped among the huge trees that surrounded the tower. The young man kept hold of Lishu with one hand and grabbed a branch with the other. Their combined momentum, however, thwarted him, and he lost his grip. He *tsk*'ed as his fingernails dragged down the side of the trunk.

Their fall stopped with another big bump. There was an impact, but no pain. Lishu hadn't actually hit the ground; instead, the young man was beneath her, protecting her—and beneath him was a pile of mattresses. When she looked around, in fact, she realized there seemed to be mattresses everywhere.

Both the young man's legs were broken, while the nails on his left hand had been torn out and his fingers were bleeding. And while they may have landed on some mattresses, it couldn't have been enough to keep the young man from hurting his back in the landing.

He was an absolute wreck—but he was still wearing that same awkward smile.

"Why?" Lishu said. She wasn't able to voice the complete question: Why had he saved her? Why had he not simply left her to die? She didn't know what to do with someone who had battered his own body in order to protect her.

The young man's right hand, the only uninjured part of him, was shaking for some reason. He slowly moved away, releasing her. "Are you hurt, my lady?" he asked.

"*Why?*"

She still couldn't muster any further words. Tears clouded her eyes, and her vision was full of the young man's blurry, smiling face.

"Does anything hurt?" he asked.

No! No, that wasn't why she was crying. She shook her head.

"I must apologize for presenting myself before you in such a filthy state. It was an emergency."

No! She didn't care about that.

"I tried to be careful not to use too much strength. If you nonetheless find yourself with bruises, however, please don't hesitate to punish me."

Lishu was speechless. How could he say such things? His arm around her had been powerful and yet gentle. How could she ever

punish him for that?

A moan escaped her, provoking a look of alarm from the young man. No, no—he shouldn't be worrying about her. He should be thinking about his own broken body.

"Why would you bother to rescue me?" Lishu asked finally. The Emperor would surely cast aside a consort who was suspected of infidelity. It was pointless for the young man to risk his own life to save her.

"You mustn't belittle yourself so. Saving you was worth everything. That's why I did it." He reached up with his one good hand and shyly wiped away Lishu's cascading tears. "I wanted you to be happy. That's all. Perhaps even that wish was too much ambition for a simple soldier." That smile again.

Lishu's mouth twisted and untwisted. She was wearing hardly any makeup, her eyes were swollen, and her face must have been bright red. She was embarrassed for the young man to see her this way—and her embarrassment only made what she did next even more embarrassing.

She buried her face in his chest.

"Lishu?! I mean, Consort?!"

The young man was practically panicking; she could hear his heart pounding with agitation in his chest. This went beyond embarrassment—she had to get away from him before anyone saw them, or this time she would be suspected of being unfaithful with this young man. Normally, doing something this crazy would have caused her heart to race and sent blood rushing to her head.

And indeed, her pulse was going very fast. But at the same time, she was calm, here with her face against the young man's chest, which smelled faintly of sweat but just as much of fresh leaves, new growth.

Lishu wished fervently that this brief moment might be even one second longer.

Epilogue

"It's a downright ridiculous story, isn't it?" Maomao said, flipping through the romantic tragedy that had come to them from some far country. Jinshi had only just given her back her original copy. (Well, her copy of the original copy.)

"I agree." Jinshi, who had come to return the book, leaned against a shelf, staring out the window at the sky.

The atmosphere between them was difficult to describe. Though they were alone now, Jinshi had none of his recent forcefulness. Maomao knew he understood that this wasn't the moment for it.

Consort Lishu—or rather, *former* Consort Lishu—was going to become a nun again, on the orders of the Emperor himself.

"I suspect His Majesty has had this in mind for some time," Jinshi said.

Lishu's mother was an old acquaintance of both the Emperor and Ah-Duo. His Majesty must have viewed Lishu as something akin to a daughter. That was why he had called her back to the rear palace—in hopes that she might, somehow, be happy.

The world was never so generous, though, and his attempt to make her happy backfired. Lishu found herself bullied by her half-sister and her own ladies-in-waiting, and ultimately, thanks to her position as a high consort, even found her life threatened. Locking her up in the prison tower had been an act of mercy on the Emperor's part, an attempt to protect her from the very real danger of an assassination attempt. Lishu's former chief lady-in-waiting had been, in simple terms, trying to get herself a new mistress. Most likely, she'd already been in touch with the emissary from the west —via the pigeons—because she felt she couldn't hope to rise any further in the world under Lishu. The "love letter" had been among their communications.

The fact that Lishu had ended up imprisoned with the White Lady could only be called bad luck. Maybe she really had been born under a bad star.

In the tower, Lishu had seen strange things, caused by that

sweet, bitter incense—the same smell that had come from the White Lady. It hadn't drawn attention when the Lady had been searched before being put in the tower, but when Maomao examined her personally, she found a string tied to one of the woman's teeth. The White Lady tried to bite it off, but this only made everyone more curious about what was attached to it. When they pulled it up, they discovered a small sachet of incense. This was a woman who would willingly drink quicksilver; why wouldn't she hide incense in her stomach?

The stuff might have been dangerous had Lishu continued to be subjected to it, but Luomen (a medical officer!) said that since it had stopped at this stage, there was nothing to worry about. The fact that Lishu happened to be built in such a way that such drugs were especially effective on her was just another stroke of misfortune.

"A consort can't be allowed to cause such commotion." No consort could be the cause of such trouble and go entirely without consequences—hence, the nunnery. However, before rendering his judgment, the Emperor had summoned Maomao and asked her two questions:

"What is the life span of a rumor?"

She had answered that it was seventy-five days, although he shook his head and insisted that would not be enough to save face. Then he asked:

"If there were to be a man suitable for Lishu, what kind of man would he be?"

He practically sounded like a father seeking a good match for his daughter. This was how he acted with Lishu, another man's child—Maomao could only imagine how he would be when it came time to find a match for his own offspring, Princess Lingli. Maomao knew the girl was the apple of his eye.

For just a second, she thought of the man with a scar on his right cheek, but she decided not to say so aloud. Forget strangling; it might get her head lopped clean off.

"I'm afraid that's not a question I can answer, sir—but perhaps you might consider that the man who broke both his legs, tore out all the fingernails on one hand, and dislocated his shoulder to save her merits a reward."

It was, indeed, Basen who had suffered more than any other in the present incident. Without him, Lishu would probably have

ended up like a burst persimmon. Basen, understanding that a few mattresses weren't going to be enough to help the plummeting young lady, had improvised a different approach. Instead of putting all the mattresses in one place, he'd had them spread out across the area where she was likely to land, and then he had taken all of the impact the mattresses couldn't absorb upon himself. And Maomao had thought Jinshi was a masochist! Jinshi claimed Basen didn't feel pain as acutely as other people, but even so...

The one thing she could say for certain was that she could imagine no one else who could have saved Lishu at that moment. She could just picture the reaction if she told the courtesans in the pleasure district about this: "It's destiny!" they would exclaim, eyes shining.

And then there was Lishu whom Maomao had always taken to be shy and retiring around men, yet who had buried her face in Basen's chest and cried. Maomao wasn't so uncultivated as to not understand what that meant. Jinshi had quickly cleared everyone away and kindly waited until Lishu was done weeping. That had delayed Maomao in treating Basen, but the young man probably hadn't been entirely unhappy about the situation.

Lishu, it was declared, would spend one year in the nunnery, whereupon she would return to her home and family, stripped of her title of consort. However, her family would not be punished.

As for Basen, he would be granted *anything* (it was emphasized) he might wish. Be it an object or a person, so long as it was within the Emperor's power to grant, he would have it. Nor need he decide hastily, the Emperor advised. Basen could wait to say what he wanted—up to a year.

Maomao smiled with a touch of bitterness: this young man and woman had fallen for each other at first sight, yet they discovered true love never did run as smooth as it did in the stories. But still, this wasn't a bad outcome at all.

After all this, Maomao reread the tragic romance again—but it still didn't make any sense to her.

Not everything was wrapped up so neatly, however. The emissary from the west requested custody of the White Lady, who had been arrested as a criminal. Her reasoning? "Because she was one of Ayla's agents."

Ayla: the other emissary, the one who had been involved with selling feifa firearms to the Shi clan. The woman who somehow still

seemed to be causing problems for them even now.

That wasn't all, for the emissary requested something even bolder: she had cornered Lahan about lending aid or giving her asylum earlier, and now, amazingly, she pressed for the latter. This must have come as a shock to Lahan, who had been busy with his potato cultivation. What's more, the emissary had a stunning idea as to how the asylum should be effected: she requested to enter the rear palace. "I need not be a high consort," she had said. "Even the status of a middle consort would be enough." Admittedly, it would be a less conspicuous way of getting her into the country than specifically stating that she was being granted asylum.

One thing I don't know is how much of what she said is true, Maomao thought. She wanted to just forget about it and take a nap, but as long as Jinshi was there, she couldn't do that. She wished he would hurry up and go home.

For his part, Jinshi didn't seem particularly interested in leaving. He might not be much of a straight shooter, but he did seem to have a lot on his mind.

"What's this?" he asked, picking up a rather sorry excuse for a book. It appeared to flummox even him, with its pages of characters that looked like dried earthworms.

"What do you think?" Maomao said.

"Is it...Go?" he said, peering at the untidy rows of black and white circles. "Don't tell me...the honorable strategist?"

"Yes, sir."

Lahan had foisted it upon her in exchange for the information about the emissary, on the assumption that she must know someone at the printing house.

No idea if they'd want any part of it, though. Not after she'd bought up the book they had been planning to use as a printing source. Even if they did take the job, they would have to be able to read the text first—that seemed like the biggest hurdle. Normally, she would have simply shoved the thing back in Lahan's face, but to her own surprise she found herself accepting the sad little book.

Jinshi looked rather taken aback as well. Maomao snorted as if to say *Pay it no mind* and gazed at her laundry, which refused to dry here in the rainy season.

How long could this conversation go on? She wished it could stay this way. Also, she hoped he wouldn't tickle the back of her foot again. She was careful to sit on her feet so Jinshi couldn't see

them.

He seemed to sense what she was thinking, for he smiled indulgently. He really knew how to piss her off. She was just giving him her fiercest *Go home!* stare when the door opened.

"Oh, hey, mister." It was Chou-u. Jinshi simply nodded and raised a hand in greeting.

Chou-u trotted into the shop, ignoring how cramped it was with three people inside. Maomao was just wondering what he could be up to—when he ran a finger along her back, raising gooseflesh all over her body. "Wanna know something, mister? Freckles here can't stand it if you swipe your finger along her back. It's a hoot!"

Maomao, wondering why the hell Chou-u would bring up something like that at a moment like this, raised a hand to knuckle him in the head.

Jinshi, however, said, "Is that so?" and grinned. Then he pulled out his purse and put a fat silver piece in Chou-u's hand, far more than any kid needed for pocket change.

"Huh? What's this about, mister? What's going on?" Chou-u asked.

"Oh, I'd just like you to run a little errand for me. Take your time about it."

Maomao's eyes became dots.

"Wow! You're the best, mister!"

"Yes...take all the time you like."

"Chou-u!" Maomao exclaimed, but the little brat walked out of the shop as if to say his work here was done. She jumped up to follow him, but she felt a tingling along her spine.

"M-Master Jinshi..."

"Well, I'll be! It really works." He was smiling triumphantly. "And I'm not done paying you back."

No young man had ever looked more mischievous than he did at that moment.

The Apothecary Diaries

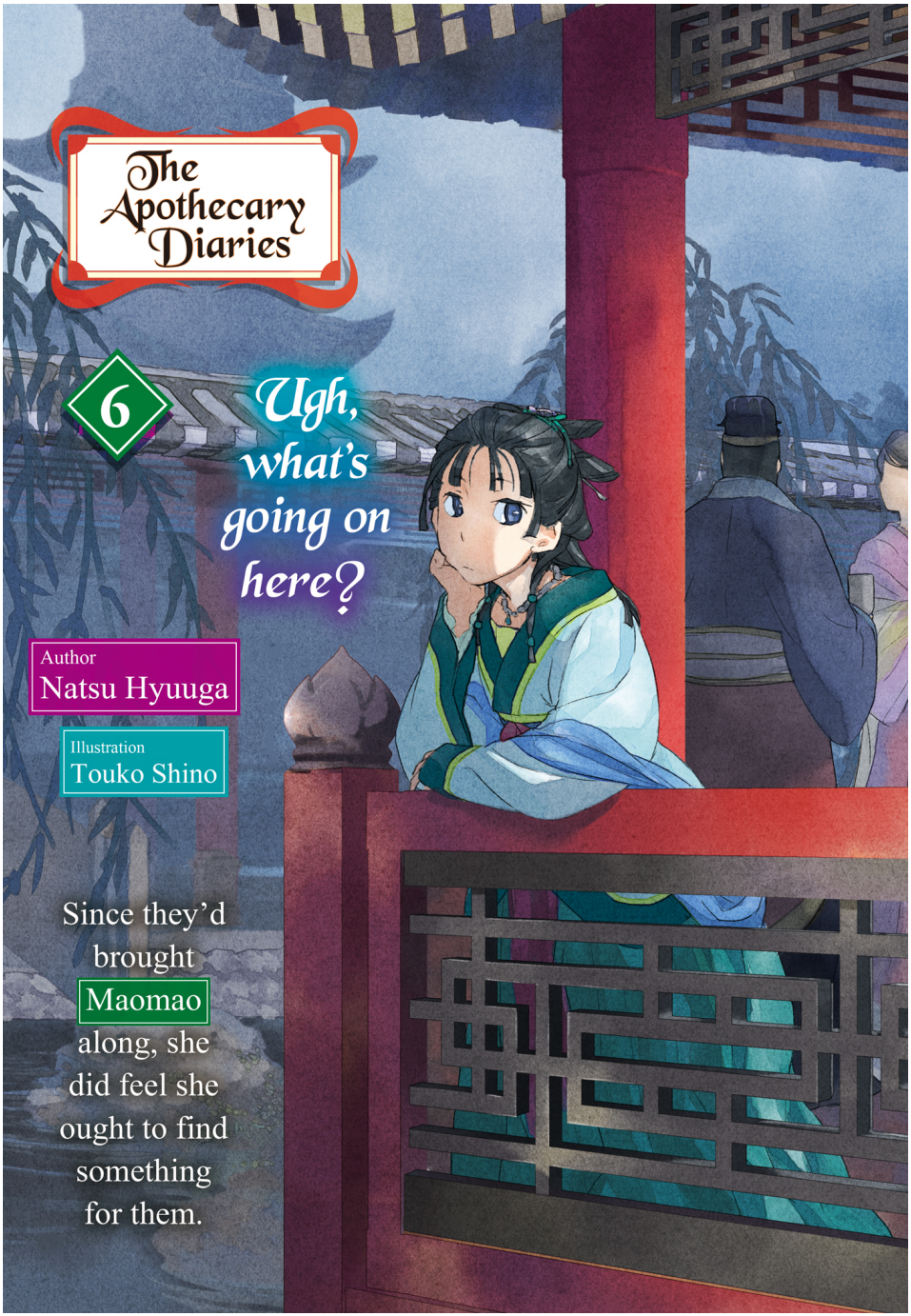
6

Ugh, what's going on here?

Author
Natsu Hyuuga

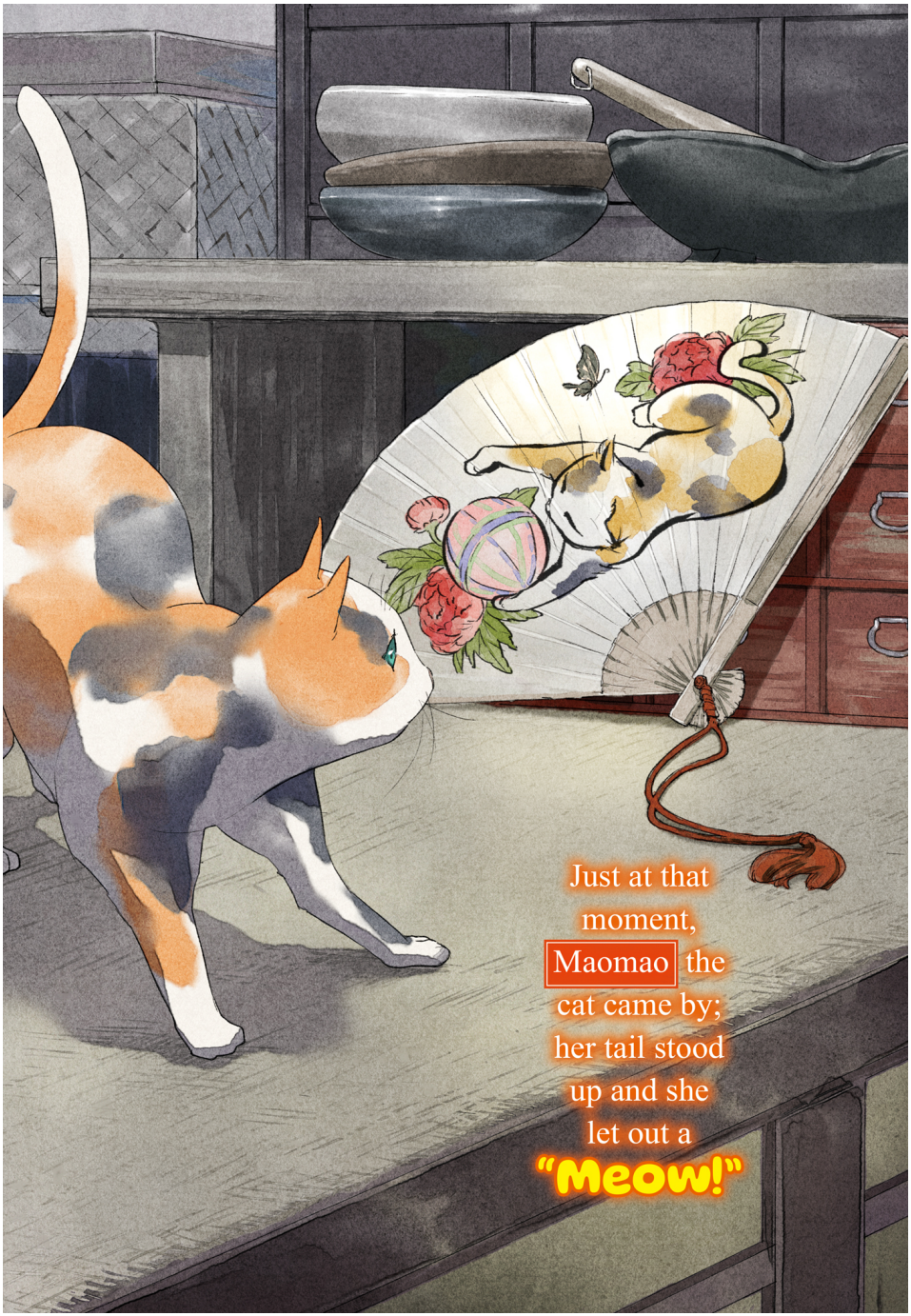
Illustration
Touko Shino

Since they'd brought Maomao along, she did feel she ought to find something for them.



He took Basen's chin with his free hand and pressed his thumb to his lips.
"M-Master Jinshi..."
"No. Be quiet."
"M-M-M..."
Basen had gone completely white.

Lishu shook her head furiously and swept the food off the table.
"I don't want it!"
"I don't want it!"
I don't want it!"


Just at that moment, Maomao the cat came by; her tail stood up and she let out a "Meow!"

“Are you hurt, my lady?”
“Why?”
She still couldn’t muster any further words. Tears clouded Lishu’s eyes, and her vision was full of the young man’s blurry, smiling face.

The Apothecary Diaries

Introduction

Changing Relationships

Jinshi and Maomao: their relationship takes a dramatic turn after his proposal. Meanwhile, Consort Lishu's suspicions about her relationship to her father might be put to rest, but a different charge altogether sees her put under lock and key! That causes another relationship to change: hers, with a certain young man. Maomao can tell that this gallant lad acts not only out of a sense of justice, but because of something deeper he feels for Lishu. Something he should never feel for one of the Emperor's upper consorts.

A bride who commits suicide in the western capital, a popular artist who comes down with food poisoning, and a female immortal who walks on water… Each mystery solved further unravels the tangled skein. Who is it that's after Consort Lishu? And what will happen to Jinshi and Maomao?

You won't be able to take your eyes off volume 6!

Bonus Translator's Notes

The *Apothecary Diaries* Diaries
Vol. 6

All in Good Pun

Throughout these notes we've looked at the translation process and considered questions of what makes a good translation. As I've suggested, generally speaking, a successful translation is one that recreates the reading experience of the original text in the target language. From that perspective, translation is rarely more challenging—or more interesting—than when puns and wordplay are involved.

As a case study, let's look at the conversation between Jinshi and Basen from the prologue of this volume. The conversation essentially breaks down into three "phases," each of which turns on a different ambiguous word.

I.

"Yes, Master Jinshi?" Basen replied, using Jinshi's assumed name. That was easiest for Jinshi. If Basen wasn't going to call him by his true name, as he had when they were children, then this was the next best thing.

"Have you ever succeeded in bringing someone around?"

Frankly, Basen was not a very good choice to talk to about such matters, but Jinshi wasn't looking for a serious response. He could answer his own questions; he just wanted to talk out loud so he didn't sit there with his mind going in circles. Basen didn't need to understand exactly what Jinshi meant; he just needed to offer a yes *or* no *or a grunt here or there.*

In the first part of the conversation, Jinshi asks Basen: "*Kake-*

hiki ga umaku itta koto wa aru ka?" or literally, "Do you have the experience of *kake-hiki* going well?" If you look *kake-hiki* up in the dictionary, you'll probably find a definition like *negotiations* or maybe *arguments*. Those two words alone should suggest the range of meanings this term can cover. More germane to our scene here, those negotiations could be political—or they could be romantic. Jinshi is seemingly thinking of "negotiations" with one particular lady, but Basen can't be sure if he's talking about his various potential prospects, or perhaps one of the political matters he has to deal with in the western capital.

When you're dealing with a situation like this, as the translator, you start trying to think of expressions that have a useful range in the target language. So for example, I might start with *negotiations* ("Have you ever managed to make negotiations work out?"), but outside of some very specific circumstances, like maybe a match that involves an intermediary or matchmaker, *negotiations* generally doesn't have a romantic aspect. A word like *talks* has a similar problem. Then I start thinking of *maneuvering*—*kake-hiki* can be either aboveboard or a bit underhanded—but here, too, the romantic side of the word is a little hazy. Part of the humor of this scene is that Jinshi and Basen both think they're completely clear on what the other person is saying, so we need words that would seem natural to use from each character's perspective, yet are subject to unexpected ambiguities or misinterpretations.

For this first part of the conversation, Sasha and I ended up using the expression *to bring someone around*. This may not have an explicitly romantic aspect, but if Jinshi is thinking of Maomao and wondering how he can convince her to accept his proposal, he might well speak in terms of winning someone over.

II.

"Er, how so, sir? You've spoken to so many people since we got here that I don't know whom you might be referring to..."

It was true: a great many women had spoken to Jinshi since his arrival in the western capital. How many? One wouldn't wish to say.

"You don't have to finish that thought," Jinshi said.

[...]

"What brings this on, Master Jinshi? Did something happen with you*?"*

"No. It's simply that there's someone I would very much like to triumph over," Jinshi said, although he had to struggle to get the words out. He was nowhere near smooth enough to handle "so many" women at once, and he wanted to avoid inflating Basen's opinion of his abilities any further.

He went on: "I'd gotten the idea that I knew how to play this game. This someone can be rather elegant, but in practice I'm supposed to be the superior—and perhaps I trusted too much to that. That illusion was thoroughly shattered tonight, and it's left me feeling quite pathetic."

[…]

Basen was looking at him with a hint of amazement. "This person must be quite skilled, sir, to make you say that."

"Yes…" At least Basen didn't seem to realize whom Jinshi was talking about. Thankfully. "We fought over something minor," he said. "I started the fight…and I lost it."

The second part of the conversation, which begins with "Er, how so, sir?" turns on the word *aite*. This is an infamous term among translators because it has a seemingly endless number of potential synonyms in English, most of which often don't sound quite right. It represents a relatively simple concept that we might sum up as *another party*, someone else involved in a situation.

Unfortunately for us, terms like *another party* or *the other party* only really show up in English in legalese, and are rarely helpful in fiction translation. Thus we turn to that cornucopia of synonyms: *aite* can be variously translated as *opponent*, *partner*, *buddy*, *the other person*, *the other guy*, *the other player*, and more besides, depending on the context. Perhaps most importantly for this passage, *aite* can refer to a romantic partner. So when Jinshi says "There's an *aite* I would very much like to triumph over" ("*Doushitemo kachitai aite ga dekita*"), it's clear to him that he means someone he wants to vanquish in the game of love. Basen, however, not unreasonably takes the term in the sense of an opponent or perhaps even a romantic rival—an impression fostered in part by Jinshi's use of aggressive, even martial language to describe the relationship.

In this case the solution turned out to be one of "less is more." Because Jinshi speaks of *triumphing* (*katsu*, here conjugated in the -*tai* form showing a desire, means *to win* or *to achieve victory*), we figured the notion of an opposing person or force was already

implied. Rather than restrict ourselves to a translation for *aite* that made that explicit, such as *opponent*, we simply went with *someone I wish to triumph over* and let the verb do the heavy lifting. Throughout the rest of the passage, we wrote around the need for any pronouns ("this person"... "I'm supposed to be the superior") so there wouldn't be anything to tip Basen off that Jinshi might not have a male *aite* in mind.

III.

Basen looked puzzled for a second, but then he said, "Ah!" as if it all made sense to him. "You lost, sir? Ahh, so that's what you mean... A sparring partner, sir? What a boor they must be!"

He could be perceptive at the most surprising moments. Perhaps it would sound insulting to suggest Jinshi was startled to realize Basen even knew what it really meant to be rivals in love. But that Rikuson—that was his name, right?—he might look like just another pretty face, but he wasn't to be underestimated. He was a direct subordinate of the strategist, Lakan—but he *wasn't the one Jinshi was worried about.*

The conversation isn't over, though: the wordplay becomes even more complex in a virtuosic third segment which leaves the reader snickering delightedly and the beleaguered translation team digging ever deeper for a solution. In the final "phase" of the talk (starting with "Ahh, so that's what you mean"), the word at issue is *saya-ate*.

Saya-ate literally means *a bumping of scabbards*; the term ostensibly originated from the time when two samurai might get into an argument because the ends of their swords' scabbards bumped against each other. From this background, the word came to mean *an argument over something trivial*, and our reading is that Basen comes up with the expression because Jinshi has just mentioned a fight over "something minor" (*sasai na koto*).

However, nowadays the main meaning of *saya-ate* is actually *a romantic rival*, and this is the sense in which Jinshi seems to take it. He's impressed that Basen even knows the meaning of the word, but it so happens they each have a different meaning in mind. Obviously, to translate *saya-ate* as something like *romantic rival* in Basen's line would be incorrect, because that's not what he means

by it and anyway, it would undermine the confusion and the humor of the moment.

Partly by association with the martial-ish language of the immediately preceding part of the conversation, we went with *a sparring partner*, as the expression could refer to anything from a literal partner for engaging in physical combat practice to a lover with whom you have a tiff.

It's this sustained series of misunderstandings that leads to the two men's differing ideas of what Basen is offering when he suggests he might be able to "help" Jinshi. The entire scene builds to and pays off in that comedic moment, so a successful translation needs to set up how Jinshi and Basen talk past each other in the same way as the original. As you can see from this discussion, there is often a way to conjure an equivalent experience in the target language through the careful consideration of synonyms, but it's also necessary to pay attention to the larger flow of the text.

Speaking of the larger flow of the text, because this is *The Apothecary Diaries*, the author isn't content to let this string of jokes lie at the end of the prologue. Later, when Basen and Maomao encounter each other in Chapter 1, Basen remarks that Jinshi has been acting strangely and asks if she's aware if he's engaged in any kind of *shoubu-goto*. Literally meaning *competition*, this word is often synonymous with *gambling* (*kakegoto*). However, some J > J dictionaries define it as "events involving winning and losing," and it seemed likely to us that his line is a reference to the prologue—that is, he's wondering if Maomao knows anything about this mysterious *aite* with whom Jinshi is (in Basen's understanding) locked in battle. Our final translation for this line, "Have you heard about him...I don't know. Being under pressure from anybody?" takes a somewhat broad approach to the pun, but we thought this gave the widest latitude for interpretation.

IV.

Just so we don't leave you with the impression that every pun in J > E translation is a riddle box that takes endless thought and discussion to unpack, let me highlight a joke that occurs in Chapter 2. When the uncle of the "floating bride" wades into the lake and grabs a fish, we have him saying: "Gorgeous! I love it! I wish this were snapper, but I won't *carp* about it!" In the Japanese, the line

is: "*Medetai, medetai. Kore ga tai de nai no ga zan'nen da.*" Literally, "What a happy occasion, what a joyous occasion. It's a real shame this isn't red snapper [*tai*]." It's a dad-joke-level pun that plays the Japanese word for "red snapper" off the last couple syllables of *medetai* (lit. *joyous*, an expression of approval and happiness). In English, "to carp about something" means to complain about it…and there are carp in the lake. This was a joke that practically wrote itself. Granted, correspondences that close are few and far between—but they do exist, and you accept them with a grateful heart when you get them.

With these examples from both ends of the difficulty scale, you can see that translating humor, even language-based humor, can be difficult but is by no means impossible. Admittedly, when you're on a tight deadline and you find yourself banging your head against this kind of passage, there can be a temptation to exclaim, "Really, Author-*san*?! Must you?" But when you do come up with an effective solution to this kind of puzzle, it's one of the real joys of translation. Hopefully, you can at least figure out something functional, and if you're thoughtful, careful, and a little bit lucky, you might even produce something elegant enough to make a target-language reader laugh just like a reader of the original. It's those sublime moments, when a reader who doesn't speak the original language is able to enjoy what the author is doing in a way comparable to a reader of the source text, that translators aspire to; those are the moments that foster real pleasure and real understanding.

We hope you enjoyed this survey of one of the most frustrating and most rewarding elements of translation. Thanks for joining us—have fun, read widely, and we'll see you in the next volume!

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